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SYRIA:

THE ROLE OF HTS IN THE CURRENT STRATEGIC SCENARIO IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

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INTRODUCTION

Hayʾat Taḥrīr al-Shām, (BBC, 2017) "Organization for the Liberation of the Levant" or "Levant Liberation Committee", commonly referred to as Tahrir al-Sham and abbreviated HTS (ITCT, 2018), is classified as a Salafist jihadist terrorist group involved in the Syrian conflict. HTS currently stands as the largest Salafist entity in the Idlib region, making it a direct threat for all external and internal actors involved in the strategic management of the Syrian conflict and especially - considering their geographic proximity - for the Turkish and Syrian Government.

The following brief analyses the presence of the HTS and its relationship with other groups within the Syrian scenario. It further aims to portray the gradual development of the group within the Syrian conflict and the geographical expansion of its influence.

In order to thoroughly examine the organisation, the present analysis will be broken down into 5 distinct yet interrelated sections. Additionally, specific cases via the ESISC database are examined as examples in order to portray a more solid visualisation of the group in the contemporary condition of the Syrian conflict. Finally, this report will argue why HTS should be perceived as one of the most important internal actors in the Syrian conflict.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The historical background of the group could be officially traced back to January 2012, when Jabhat al-Nusra ("Support Front") first surfaced, and it did not officially claim allegiance to Al-Qaeda afraid, that it could lose local support (al-Tamimi, 2019). This course of action could be compared to other jihadist groups rising in the MENA region after the 2011 uprisings, such as the Ansar al-Shari'a movements in Tunisia, Libya and Yemen (Project, 2018). Nevertheless, via a closer observation of jihadist forums, would reflect that Jabhat al-Nusra embodied a more significant, transnational jihadi movement. In fact, according to international media, Jabhat al-Nusra gradually solidified its place as an important actor of the Syrian conflict by the end of 2012 (CSIS, 2019).

Henceforward, the US intelligence classified the group as a terrorist organisation on May 31, 2018, due to the belief that it originated from within the Islamic State of Iraq (then thought of as Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq). An action that caused widespread anger from its members. The US State Department issued a statement claiming that: "These aliases have been added to al-Nusrah Front's designations as a Foreign Terrorist Organization [FTO] under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, and as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist [SDGT] under Executive Order 13224". (DN, 2018)".

That classification, however, must have triggered a sequence of events, within the leadership of the group, since right after the American identification of its direct association with IS and Al-Sham, the group openly declared it was not part of these movements (Al-Jabassini, 2019). As Al-Tamimi explains, in April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi unilaterally declared that Jabhat al-Nusra should merge with his Islamic State of Iraq to form the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham. That was, in fact, the official schism among the groups since Jabhat al-Nusra leader Abu Muhammad al-Jowlani clarified that the allegiance of the group belonged to Al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, hoping that al-Zawahiri would rule in his favour in the dispute with Baghdadi (al-Tamimi, 2019).

As a consequence, al-Zawahiri ordered the IS to leave Syria and return to Iraq as the Islamic State of Iraq while urging the 2 sides to cooperate. Al-Zawahiri's rulings, however, went unheard, as Baghdadi insisted on his group's remaining in Syria, thus marking the actual break between the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda (Davison, 2017).

This fracture has through the years become deeper and recently evolved into an intense rivalry with increasing tensions between the 2 groups not only in theatres where they are both presents (e.g. Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, etc.) but also in their respective communication and propaganda strategies.

As previously reported by ESISC, one of the key events that marked the growing divide between the 2 groups happened on April 18, 2019, when the leader of Al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, launched a series of video focused on religious lectures, with the first episode focused on the theme of "injustice".

That first episode features al-Zawahiri in white clothes, sitting at a desk with a book in front of him and another object that may be a rifle. Most of the 8:16-minute video comprised of al-Zawahiri citing from the Koran and the Hadith on the subject of injustice, which is the title of the episode. He focused on the concept of injustice concerning jihadists and how jihadists must beware of becoming unjust. He says a jihadist individual or group will waste their jihad if they are unjust. Jihad does not absolve a mujahid from sin if he fails to be fair and genuine in his pursuit of jihad, he adds.

Al-Zawahiri says there are 2 types of jihad: one that is done purely for God's sake, to eliminate corruption, and in which the mujahid obeys his leader. The other type, he says, sees a mujahid disobey his leader and set out to battle to show off and satisfy his ego. Arguably, this video was mainly directed towards the Islamic State and other groups that around that time separated from Al-Qaeda. The intent behind the video was therefore twofold: on the one side Al-Qaeda wanted to attack the Islamic State and its methods by labelling that rival organisation has "unjust", while, on the other hand, Al-Zawahiri wanted to gain visibility and assert his authority as a global jihadist leader, especially in consideration of the growing rivalry with both the Islamic State (IS) and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

THE FORMATION OF HTS

On Saturday, January 28, 2017, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly al-Nusra Front), the Ansar al-Din Front, Jaysh al-Sunna, Liwa al-Haqq, and the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement merged forming HTS (BBC, 2017). After the announcement, smaller insurgent groups and individual fighters joined their ranks, gradually forming one of the largest Jihadi insurgent entities in the region. The merged group is currently led by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and former Ahrar al-Sham leader, although the High Command consists of leaders from different groups (Joscelyn, Al Qaeda and allies announce 'new entity' in Syria, 2017).

At this point, it has to be mentioned that many sub-groups and individuals defected from Ahrar al-Sham, reflecting a more conservative Salafist narrative. This would be one of the key reasons why a plethora of experts in the field continue to refer to this group by its previous names such as al-Nusra Front, or Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (Joscelyn, Al Qaeda and allies announce 'new entity' in Syria, 2017). Furthermore, since the merge on January 2017, the Ansar al-Din Front and Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement have since split off from Tahrir al-Sham (ITCT, 2018).

Regardless of this drastic change in the structural formation of the group, Tahrir al-Sham is still believed to hold strong ties with Al-Qaeda and is considered by the United Nations and the US as one of its branches (Ali, 2019).

Nevertheless, Tahrir al-Sham has officially denied being part of Al-Qaeda since Abu Jaber (also known as Hashem al-Sheikh – the first leader of Ahrar al-Sham) claimed in an early statement on September

2015, that the group is "an independent entity and not an extension of previous organizations or factions", adding that "it is a merger where all factions and titles were dissolved and disintegrated" (Joscelyn, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham leader calls for 'unity' in Syrian insurgency, 2017). A statement that intended to distance HTS from the legacy of Al-Qaeda's official arm, whereas both he and other members claim that it does not exist anymore (Ali, 2019).

EXTERNAL PERCEPTION OF HTS AND ITS RIVALS

Throughout 2018, HTS suffered loses on multiple grounds, including the official disavowal by al-Qaeda's central leadership as well as large-scale losses of territory, decreased local support, assassinations of key leaders, and significant defections in its ranks (Project, 2018). The situation on the ground and the current moves on the Syrian strategic scenario suggest that HTS's future is uncertain for 3 main reasons: the refusal to join a broader Turkish-backed insurgent coalition; the military pressure exerted by the Syrian Government and its Russian ally; the competition of other organisation active in the territory.

Turkey has pressured the group to disband and join a broader Turkish-backed opposition coalition, though HTS leaders have remarked that "matters relating to the organisational structure of Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham are non-negotiable." (CSIS, 2019)

The group also faces an assault by the Syrian regime and its allies, including Russia, in Idlib. ESISC has pointed out that since the end of April 2019, forces of Bashar al-Assad and the Russian air force have intensified their bombings against the south of Idlib province, despite an agreement signed in September by Turkey and Russia to make Idleb a "buffer zone". That has arguably intensified the efforts from the group to survive within the region, increasing its attacks against the Syrian government and the Russian forces.

That is a somewhat observable pattern since, after the initial phase of bombardment in April from the Syrian army, ESISC has attributed at least 14 attacks from HTS that were directed towards the Syrian government and its allies. For instance, on May 20, 2019, HTS official propaganda branch released an infographic claiming that it killed more than 85 Syrian Army forces in different attacks.

Finally, HTS has numerous competitors among the Syrian opposition, including the National Liberation Front, which includes groups like Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Ahrar, and Suqour al-Sham. Currently, HTS is characterised within the international system as a terrorist organisation, contributing to the spread of violent Jihadism in the Syrian conflict (BBC, 2017). The US administration has condemned the actions of the organisation multiple times, classifying it as a terrorist group. That also includes Turkey, which designated the group as a terrorist organisation in August 2018. Additionally, Iran has repeatedly accused the countries of Qatar and Saudi Arabia for allegedly supporting the group financially and militarily via the provision of weaponry and ammunition (FARS, 2017).

HTS STRATEGIC AND TACTICAL APPROACH

On January 30, 2017, right after the official formation of the group, there were reports of mobilisations by Tahrir al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham at the Bab al-Hawa Border Crossing and other nearby areas, and that the 2 groups were preparing for another round of clashes. On 30 January, Russian media reported that there were approximately 31,000 fighters in HTS while in March 2017 analyst Charles Lister suggested that the group is "likely commanding 12,000 to 14,000 fighters" (Lister, 2017). ESISC on June 4, 2019, estimated that north-western Idlib is still home to around 30,000 shooters, including foreign mercenaries, and fighters of the Nusra Front terror group. Directly suggesting that HTS still has a strong presence in the region.

HTS has mainly opted for insurgency tactics, though there have been instances that it 'imitated' conventional army tactics (BBC, 2017). ESISC accurately reported on June 7, 2019, that at least 500 HTS members with the support of armoured vehicles, attacked Syrian army positions near the towns of Jabin and Tal Melh, according to Maj. Gen. Viktor Kupchishin, commander of the Russian centre for Syrian reconciliation.

In this instance, the group suffered significant casualties, estimated to reach at least 120 members, directly indicating that the terrorist organisation has not fully incorporated conventional military tactics in their attacks.

The group is also known for committing a wide array of actions in the areas of Idlib, in order to 'win hearts and minds' though relatively unsuccessfully since it faces continuous oppositions. ESISC noted in a particular instance, whereas HTS reportedly offered financial rewards to fighters from rival jihadist groups for their role in attacks against Syrian government forces.

This information was initially shared on April 16, 2019, by the prominent online jihadist al-Aseef al-Abdurrahman who claimed HTS gave a total of 3,400 dollars to members of Hurras al-Din and Ansar al-Tawhid "in compensation" for their participation in recent raids against the Syrian army. Hurras al-Din and Ansar al-Tawhid are both members of the jihadist operations room "Incite the Believers" that was set up in October 2018. Nevertheless, this is not the first time HTS has provided financial rewards for jihadists from other groups. Such a move by HTS is likely aimed at winning over terrorists from rival groups as well as asserting its authority in the rebel-held north by bestowing aid upon smaller groups.

GEOGRAPHIC NETWORK OF ACTION

HTS is widely considered to be one of the most powerful entities within the context of Syrian insurgency today (CSIS, 2019).

The group exerts control over most of the north-western province of Idlib, including the province's capital of Idlib City. Indeed, the province is the main area administered by the rebel group today. However, this represents a unicum for the HTS as, given the balkanization of Syria's insurgency, the level of influence of the group in Idlib and its immediate surroundings is not replicated in other zones of the insurgency. As Al-Tamimi claims, the north Aleppo countryside enclave extending from Afrin to Jarabulus has no meaningful HTS presence (al-Tamimi, 2019).

HTS maintains a presence in the 2 southern provinces of Deraa and Quneitra, which remain primarily under the control of insurgents groups broadly come under the so-called 'Southern Front' coalition. This 'coalition' has allegedly received backing from an operations room in Amman, Jordan, and is allegedly overseen by Western, Gulf and Jordanian intelligence. (Al-Jabassini, 2019). Within these territorial zones, as it was mentioned previously, the group does not generally provide the institutions of governance that it offers in Idlib, and "there is little evidence of influence over the existing local councils and the Dar al-'Adl, which is the primary court system in rebel-held parts of southern Syria." (al-Tamimi, 2019).

In these areas, HTS does not generally offer the institutions of governance that it offers in Idlib, and there is little evidence of influence over the existing local councils and the Dar al-'Adl (the primary court system in rebel-held parts of southern Syria). (al-Tamimi, 2019) Instead, the group's most crucial function in southern Syria has been taking a lead role in insurgent offensives that take place in the geographical triangle of Aleppo, Hama and Latakia on an occasional basis (al-Tamimi, 2019).

More recently, ESISC reported that Kafr Nabudah in the northern Hama countryside had fallen to the Hay' at Tahrir al-Shame (HTS), on Wednesday, May 22, 2019. According to local sources, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) withdrew from the town after more than 12 hours of heavy clashes, during which several waves of attacks by HTS were repelled (SouthFront, 2019).

The Syrian army lost its last territory in the town on the following day, retreating to the peripheral areas surrounding it. The terrorist group claimed that 50 Syrian soldiers and officers were killed in the town (MCD, 2019). HTS' news network Iba'a released a video from Kafr Nabudah showing several destroyed battle tanks and vehicles. Those vehicles might have been used in the attack above near the towns of Jabin and Tal Melh.

CONCLUSION

ESISC has traced the actions of the group since its formation and has directly reported more than 190 incidents involving the HTS, observing its role within the Syrian context.

The significant majority of these incidents included hostile actions committed mainly against the Syrian Army and claims of terrorist actions such as the tactical deployment of IEDs and car-bombs mainly within the geographical areas whereas the population was generally expressing support towards the Syrian government or opposing insurgent groups such as IS since 2018.

Until this point, the course of the organisation appears to be unclear, as information regarding its network structure is particularly limited and difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, HTS has shown extreme levels of adaptability and resilience since 2017 and seems to entail tactical elements that would characterise the group as a 'dune' organisation.

The concept of the Dune organisation is based on the argument that the strategic behaviour of HTS relies on a process of indecisiveness between regional presence and a stance of disappearance. In fact, from a behavioural standpoint, a dune organisation would reflect extreme levels of instability. Shaul Mishal and Maoz Rosenthal within their thesis "Al-Qaeda as a Dune Organization: Toward A Typology of Islamic Terrorist Organizations", offer a particularly valuable visualisation regarding the function of a dune organisation. More specifically, the perception of regional presence is associated with stable territorial formations: nation-states, international markets, or ethnic groups Disappearance tactics, on the other hand, are strictly related to the concept of the Dune organisation (Rosenthal, 2006).

More accurately in the words of Mishal and Rosenthal, "the Dune concept is inspired by the de-territorialisation of the new political order: the world image of "geopolitical vertigo." That is a world that enables global terrorist organisations to adopt dune-like dynamics. The Dune movement is almost random, moving from one territory to another, affecting each territory, changing its characteristics and moves on to the next destination (p.15)".

Further explaining that this metaphor applies to the world of terrorist organisations since the resemblance of a geological Dune to the organisation, the naming process becomes apparent. Therefore, terrorist organisations acting in the manner described concerning Al Qaeda, act in the dynamics of a fast-moving entity that associates and dissociates itself with local elements while creating a global effect. That is a behavioural element observed in the case of HTS. An organisation that fluctuates from a territorial to a less central structure, continually adapting and shifting tactics within the Syrian conflict (Rosenthal, 2006).

Although the above-described characteristics seem to suggest that HTS is likely to persist even an incredible hostile scenario, the organisation is going through a difficult moment.

Under the increasing pressure of both the Syrian Army and the Russian forces, HTS has been suffering an appropriate amount of defeats on the ground, with the most recent being on Tuesday, June 18, 2019, whereas 45 members had been killed in clashes with the Syrian government forces in Hama province. Considering the current geopolitical and strategic scenario, the pressure of Damascus and its allies over HTS are not likely to diminish in the short term.

All these conditions added with the potential situation whereas the group has completely cut ties with all Al-Qaeda support in the region, merge into a situation that is not ideal for the prospects of this organisation.

The organisation might face severe difficulties in defending its territorial assets such as Idlib since it is a geostrategic junction that attracts a multitude of actors in the region, though it could potentially transform into a less territorially based entity.

Arguably, HTS could be perceived as a by-product of Al-Qaeda in Syria, only balancing among the ideological structure of its predecessor and the strategic schema of IS focused on maintaining a territory. This is a balance that will most likely shift into disappearance tactics, making it a much more difficult target for the Syrian and Russian allies to tackle.

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