



## The Armed Opposition in Northwest Syria

May 15, 2020

### Executive Summary

This report details the current status, structure, and balance of power between Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Turkish-backed armed opposition forces in northwestern Syria. The first section outlines the process by which Turkey has come to dominate Syria's non-HTS armed opposition through a series of direct interventions and the reduction of regional and global engagement. The report provides a brief overview of opposition infighting and provides a structural diagram of the current order of battle and relations between non-HTS armed opposition groups supported by Turkey. The second section addresses the current status of HTS and non-HTS opposition armed groups and details the tense balance of power that exists between HTS, rivals, and Turkey. HTS is in an untenable position and is facing almost inevitable conflict with more hardline elements, Turkey-backed groups, or both.

An organizational chart detailing relations between various opposition groups is provided in Figure 2 below, which may serve as a useful guide for readers unfamiliar with some of the groups discussed below.

### Introduction

Thousands of armed groups have formed over the course of the Syrian conflict. Most of these, formed between 2012-2013, were little more than a few handfuls of civilians or defectors with a name or a YouTube video that were quickly subsumed into rapidly growing armed movements and unions. By the end of 2012, the rate of new formations had begun to decline, and Syria's armed opposition began a long and difficult process of consolidation. Each subsequent union of groups seemed to last longer than its predecessors, but all were plagued by competing visions for the future of Syria, competition for resources, and, perhaps most importantly, rivalries among external backers.

As time went on, armed groups and conflict dynamics in Syria's different regions began to diverge more than coalesce. Each region reflected the closest neighboring country more than any national priority or vision. Eastern Syria became dominated by Kurdish-led forces and ISIS, Hezbollah played a major role along the Lebanese border, Jordan's tight control of its border forced a semblance of unity in the south, and the relatively open Syrian-Turkish border led to a proliferation of independent armed actors in NW Syria. Regional and global interference in the Syrian conflict have shaped Syria's armed opposition as much as any domestic, Syrian-led efforts, and it is perhaps this factor that has, above all else, led to the high degree of coordination among armed opposition groups that we see today.

Armed opposition groups in Syria today generally fall into four categories: Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Syrian National Army (SNA), the National Front for Liberation (NLF), and a handful of smaller, hardline groups that nevertheless play an important role in conflict dynamics. These four categories can be further reduced to just two classifications – HTS/hardliners, and Turkish-funded and controlled groups. As

opposition-held territory shrunk progressively closer to the Turkish border, and as erstwhile international backers of the opposition turned away, Turkey has re-forged the Syrian opposition into a tool of its domestic and international agenda. This is not to say that Syria's armed opposition is merely a Turkish tool – the two have both common interests and amity, but it is Turkish interests that will define the future of Syria's armed opposition for the foreseeable future.

### **The Turkish-Backed Free Syrian Army**

#### Operation Euphrates Shield

Current armed opposition group structures began to take shape in 2016 with Operation Euphrates Shield (OES). OES represented the first direct Turkish military intervention in Syria and resulted in the formation of a loose umbrella network of armed groups supported by Turkey for the duration of the offensive. OES's goals were defined by Turkish interests, namely blocking the establishment of a land bridge between the Kurdish-dominated regions of Afrin and Menbij. To accomplish this, OES fought primarily against ISIS and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) during the offensive, but, notably, refrained from engaging with Syrian government forces.

Following the end of the offensive in March 2017, opposition armed groups supporting OES sat largely idle in northern Aleppo governorate for a full year. Physically separated from the ongoing fight between the government of Syria armed forces and opposition armed groups in Hama and Idleb and barred from engaging with Syrian government forces to their south, opposition armed groups supporting OES began fighting amongst each other as they sought to establish themselves in their new territory.

#### Operation Olive Branch

The second major development in the establishment of today's armed opposition structures again came in the form of a Turkish intervention that was, once again, aimed at Kurdish-held territories. Operation Olive Branch (OOB), which captured the territory of Afrin, was the first foray of the newly-formed Syrian National Army (SNA). The establishment of the Turkish-supported SNA brought more structure to northern Aleppo governorate armed opposition groups (at least on paper) but did not do away with infighting. In fact, the end of OOB in late March / early April 2018 brought a temporary increase in opposition infighting in NW Syria.

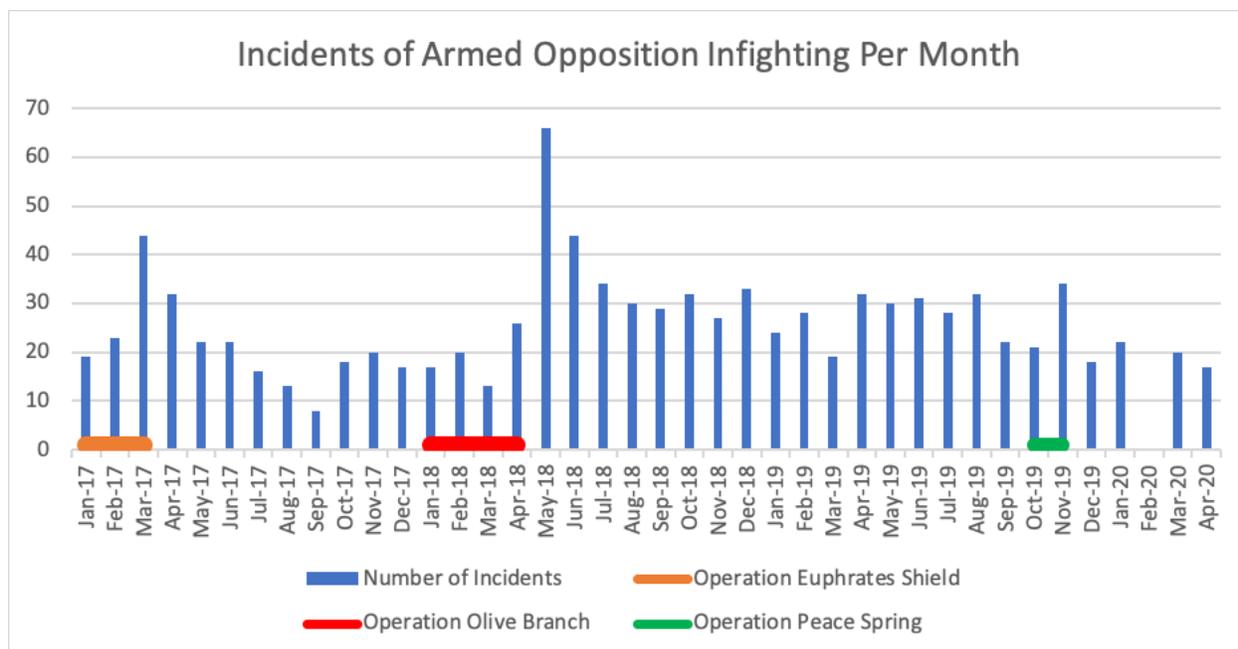


Figure 1: Recorded incidents of infighting between non-HTS opposition groups in NW Syria. Data from [ACLED](#).

The end of Operation Olive Branch also brought groups from the opposition’s newly formed Syrian National Army (SNA) into contact with opposition territory in Idlib for the first time. The opening of a new land corridor between northern Aleppo governorate and Idlib led to a sharp increase in fighting between Hai’yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and a newly-formed union between Ahrar al-Sham and Nour al-Din al-Zinki.<sup>1</sup> Persistent HTS aggression combined with the steady influx of fighters expelled from government-captured areas in southern Syria soon led to the formation of another union of opposition armed groups in May 2018 called the National Front for Liberation (NLF), and by late summer of 2018, most armed opposition groups in Idlib had joined the NLF.

The NLF, like the SNA, received support from Turkey, which also led the process of vetting and integrating fighters arriving from southern Syria in Turkish-administered territories along the Turkish-Syrian border into the existing ranks of both the NLF and SNA. This support, combined with the large number of groups and territorial control of approximately 50% of opposition-held territory in Idlib, led observers to believe the NLF to be an effective counterweight to HTS. When large-scale fighting eventually broke out between the NLF and HTS in early 2019, however, the NLF lasted less than ten days against HTS before surrendering to HTS and losing much of its territory, influence, and all control over civil administration in Idlib. As has been the case with nearly all armed group mergers over the course of the Syrian conflict, despite the mergers, each member unit maintained a distinct area of operation and command structure and was either unwilling or unable to assist others in the union when confronted by HTS.

#### Operation Peace Spring

On October 4, 2019, Syrian National Army commanders in Turkey announced that the remaining member groups of the NLF had joined the ranks of the Syrian National Army – an announcement that appeared to

<sup>1</sup> See The Carter Center’s weekly conflict summary for [February 22-28](#) and [March 15-21, 2018](#).

take NLF commanders by surprise.<sup>2</sup> When contacted by The Carter Center for comment, an SNA spokesperson clarified that, as of the time of writing, work is still ongoing to integrate the NLF into the SNA. The SNA has planned for the NLF to join and organize itself into legions 4-7 of the SNA, but until such a restructuring can be fully agreed upon and finalized, NLF groups will maintain their current structure as they work alongside the SNA. Once again, the Turkey-backed merger was announced days before yet another Turkish-led offensive against Kurdish forces in north-eastern Syria. On October 9, 2019, Turkey began Operation Peace Spring (OPS), using member groups of the Syrian National Army and National Liberation Front to advance against Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) positions in NE Syria.

### Syrian Government Advances

The last major factor in the shaping of current armed opposition formations has been successive advances by the Syrian government and allied forces. The Syrian government initiated two major advances in northwestern Syria over the past year – first in the summer of 2019, and again in late 2019 through early March 2020. Each offensive brought with it a reduction in opposition infighting and a substantial increase in Turkish support for opposition groups. During the summer 2019 offensive, Turkish support reinvigorated the NLF following its earlier defeat at the hands of HTS. New weapons and intelligence support allowed the NLF to be a significant force in southern Idlib, sharing frontlines with HTS and the independent Jaish al-Izza. The NLF's total reliance on Turkey during this period became evident later in the year when Turkey uprooted some of the NLF's units historically based in Idlib and re-deployed them to participate in OPS.

The second Syrian government offensive on Idlib, beginning in late 2019, was much more extensive. With Turkish-backed opposition armed forces spread thin because of deployment to OPS territory, Turkey was compelled to cooperate closely with HTS in Idlib, in addition to its longtime partner, the NLF. Turkey also sent significant numbers of its soldiers deep into Idlib to stabilize frontlines and prevent the influx of refugees into Turkey. Turkey's cooperation with HTS during the latest government of Syria offensive was so close that western diplomats privately complained that any intelligence support to Turkey equated to intelligence support to the formerly al-Qaeda-aligned HTS.

### Current Status of Syria's Turkey-backed Armed Opposition

As a result of three direct interventions by Turkey in Syria, the non-HTS armed opposition in Syria has come under almost complete Turkish control. Since the beginning of OPS and the announcement of the integration of the NLF into the SNA, social media accounts for most armed opposition member groups have gone silent. Those that remain active are those that have played major roles in Turkish-backed operations and often re-post announcements that are collectively shared between active member group accounts. Despite the relative silence from other member groups, conflict events reported by local news

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<sup>2</sup> Soylyu, Ragip, and Harun al-Aswad. "Syrian Rebel Groups Merge as Turkish Offensive Looms." *Middle East Eye*, October 4, 2019. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/>.

media and activist networks reveal that many of the component groups of the SNA and NLF still exist as distinct units and that infighting persists between some member groups.

The following organizational chart details the structure of the Turkish-backed armed opposition as it stands in May 2020. The chart is based upon armed groups formation announcements, postings from member groups, and conflict events reported by local networks. Groups reported to have been involved in conflict events in 2020 are highlighted in bold.

Given the years-long trend of increasing Turkish control over armed opposition structures, and the current state of the conflict in Syria, it seems unlikely that armed group structures will evolve significantly in the foreseeable future. All indications are that unity within and between the SNA and NLF will increase. That said, continued tension with HTS, popular opposition to the joint Russian/Turkish patrols in Idlib, and persistent infighting among armed opposition factions may lead to yet another realignment of armed opposition forces. In fact, an opposition commander spoke to reporters on May 4, 2020 about the potential for a new Turkish-backed formation in northern Syria in the near future.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "أيوب محمد." شمال سوريا: تشكيل جديد من 40 ألف مقاتل تدعمهم تركيا<sup>3</sup> Al-Modon, May 4, 2020. <https://www.almodon.com/>.

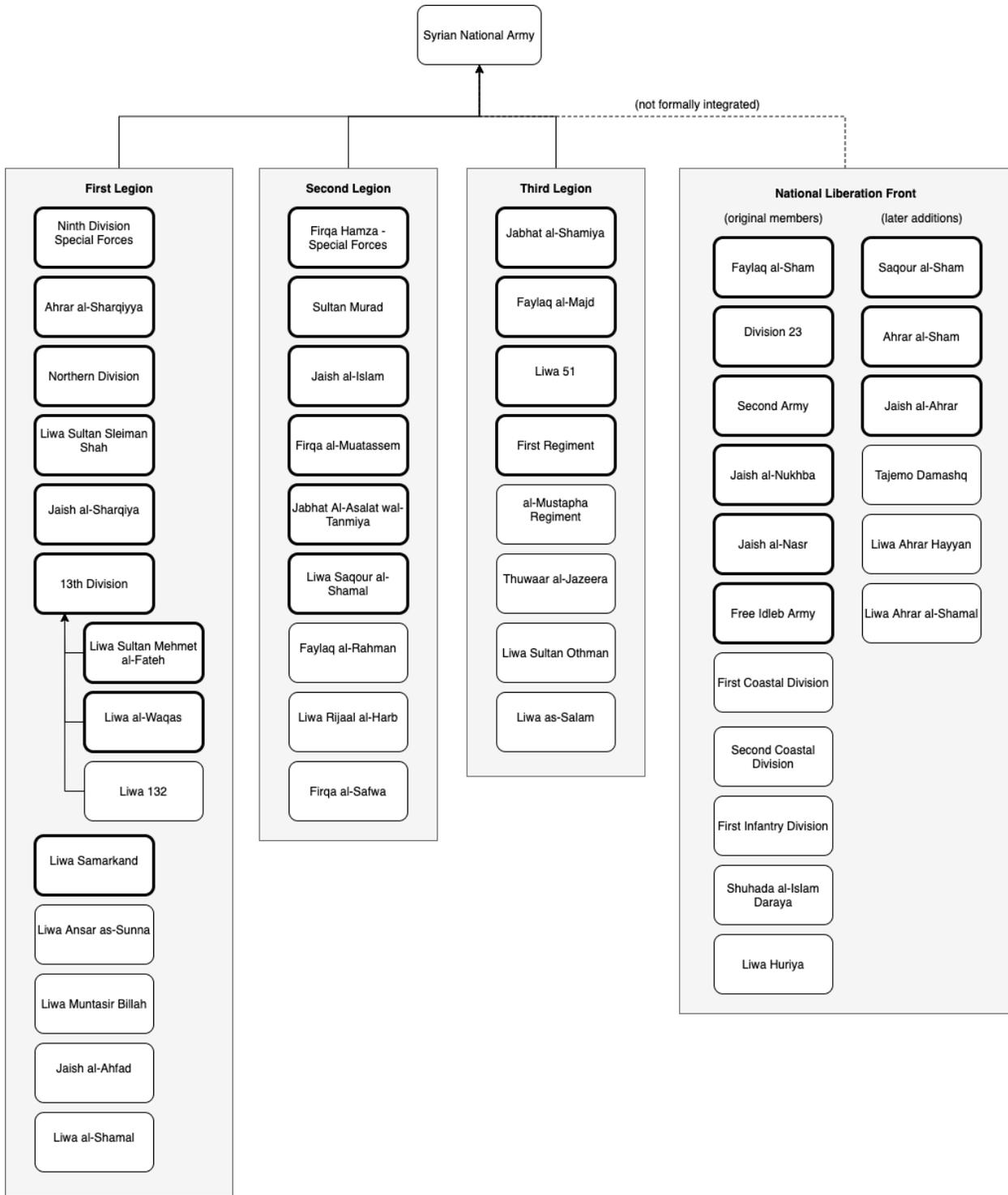


Figure 2: Organizational chart of the Turkish-backed Syrian armed opposition. Groups highlighted in bold boxes are those that have been reported as involved in conflict events in 2020. Please note: given the lack of official structural diagrams or formation announcements, this list may not be exhaustive. All efforts have been made to include significant sub-units and to highlight those known to be active.

### Current Status of Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham

Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is the latest iteration of a long series of hardline armed movements that have formed around Jabhat al-Nusra, a former al-Qaeda affiliate. This latest iteration took shape in January 2017 with a merger between Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (with Jabhat al-Nusra at its core), Jaish al-Sunna, Liwa al-Haqq, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, and the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement. Since its formation, some member groups have split or have been restructured, but despite all the changes, HTS is, at its core, the latest iteration of Jabhat al-Nusra. Since its formation at the outset of the Syrian conflict, Jabhat al-Nusra has fought in every governorate of Syria and has increasingly sought to portray itself as a purely Syrian initiative. In 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra announced that it had split from al-Qaeda, began absorbing likeminded armed factions, eliminating rivals, and eventually formed the Salvation Government to administer opposition-held territory in NW Syria. Long considered the dominant actor in NW Syria, HTS now finds itself contending with a large presence of Turkish and Turkish-backed forces. With a shaky ceasefire in place along Idlib's frontlines, HTS appears to be having a hard time balancing its hardline revolutionary ideals with the more practical considerations of its new, weakened position.

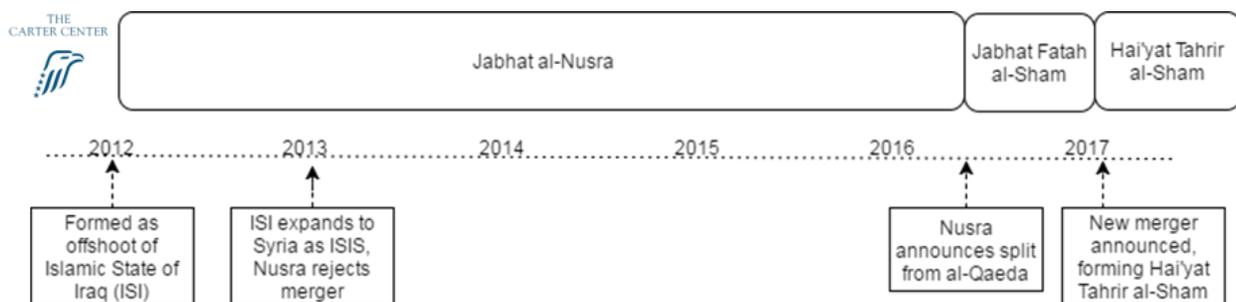


Figure 3: A timeline of developments in the formation of HTS.

### Syrian Government Offensives

The Syrian government's offensives in the summer and winter of 2019 reduced the size of territory in northwestern Syria controlled by HTS, bolstered the rival NLF, and solidified Turkey's presence in the region. While HTS had thanked the Turkish government for its role in supporting the Syrian revolution,<sup>4</sup> it has found itself in a precarious position. HTS remains the dominant armed group within Idlib, but has suffered defections, and a relative weakening of its position vis-à-vis rivals. Regardless, HTS still manages to keep its hegemonic position within Idlib through the civil services its Salvation Government provides to the population.

The ceasefire agreed between Russia and Turkey on March 5, 2020 is the latest development that threatens HTS' presence in Idlib. The acceptance of Turkey's presence in Syria has sparked debate within the organization, and the perceived acquiescence to joint Turkish-Russian patrols has been met with strong popular disapproval. An April 2020 analysis of Arabic-language Twitter traffic related to HTS, the

<sup>4</sup> Al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad, "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham Statement on Ankara-Moscow Agreement", *Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi*, March 7, 2020. <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/03/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-statement-on-ankara-moscow>.

SNA, and the NLF revealed that the most central topic discussed among Twitter users was that HTS' leader, Abu Muhammed al-Jolani, was a traitor to the revolution. While HTS has had little agency with respect to these developments, its desired image as a stalwart supporter of the Syrian revolution has been tarnished. Perhaps as a response to this criticism, in mid-April, HTS announced the formation of three new brigades, led by local commanders, to hold frontlines against the Syrian government.<sup>5</sup>

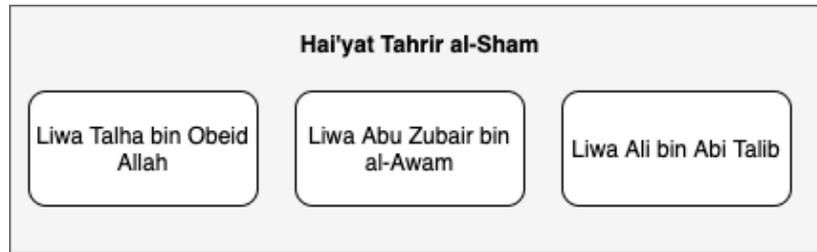


Figure 4: New sub-units announced by HTS on April 15, 2020.

### Internal Strife

Even before the latest Syrian government offensive began in late 2019, HTS had faced criticism from within. In September 2019, a then-prominent HTS commander, Abu al-Abd Ashedda, criticized the organization on multiple grounds: corruption within the group,<sup>6</sup> political failings regarding the Turkish presence, and not being prepared to fight the Syrian government.<sup>7</sup> HTS' relationship with Turkey has also contributed to internal divisions, with some in the organization reportedly questioning the group's dedication to jihad. Among the hardliners in HTS, Turkey and its military are viewed as "apostates" and infidels for their commitment to a secular constitution. Pragmatists within the organization were quick to defend the policy changes by pointing out the difficulties that HTS would have had in fighting even more enemies, a fact that some hardliners were forced to admit.<sup>8</sup>

In April 2020 high-profile individuals resigned from the group. Two in particular are of significant importance: Bassam Sahyouni of the General Shura Council and Jamil Zainiyah, aka Abu Malik Al Telli.<sup>9</sup> While Bassam Sahyouni was instrumental in establishing HTS' administrative and political apparatuses, Zainiyah's resignation was interpreted as an indication that hardliners were becoming increasingly frustrated with the more pragmatic moves of HTS's leadership. In his resignation statement, Zainiyah said that he no longer understood HTS' policies.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> "ألوية وقيادات جديدة.. تحرير الشام تهيكّل كياناتها بظل وقف إطلاق النار بإدلب" Step News, April 15, 2020. [stepagency-sy.net/](https://stepagency-sy.net/).

<sup>6</sup> al-Khatib, Khaled. "Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham Loses Third Leader in Syria This Year Read More: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/09/Syria-Idlib-Hayat-Tahrir-Al-Sham-Corruption-Defection.html#ixzz6LaA9SFdm>." Al-Monitor, September 19, 2019. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/09/syria-idlib-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-corruption-defection.html>.

<sup>7</sup> "Hayy'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) Shaken by Corruption Scandal." Al-Shahid, September 18, 2019. <https://alshahidwitness.com/hts-corruption-scandal/>.

<sup>8</sup> Heller, Sam. "Leak Reveals Jihadists' Weakening Grip in Syria's Idlib." War on the Rocks, April 10, 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/leak-reveals-jihadists-weakening-grip-in-syrias-idlib/>.

<sup>9</sup> Some reports have said that Jamil Zainiyah had returned to the group shortly afterwards. See: "What is Happening Inside 'Tahrir al-Sham'?", *Syria Call*, April 14, 2020, <https://nedaa-sy.com/en/reports/378>

<sup>10</sup> Al-Khateb, Khaled, "Defections Threaten Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib", *Al Monitor*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/syria-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-qaeda-defections-tension.html>

HTS' rank-and-file members have been more outspoken regarding their discomfort with Turkey's presence. On April 15, HTS fighters released a video that threatened to behead Turkish soldiers, forcing HTS' leadership to publish a condemnation of the video as both morally and religiously wrong.<sup>11</sup>

Despite these tensions, large-scale defections of fighters from HTS seem unlikely. Few armed groups can operate within Idlib governorate without receiving permission from HTS or joining a Turkish-backed formation. Financially, the costs of operating have made it difficult for even long-established groups to challenge HTS' hegemony.

### Hardline Groups

Although HTS has fought against ISIS in the past, it has mostly stayed clear of militarily engaging with any of the other hardline groups in Idlib. HTS has had a shaky relationship with Hurras al-Din, for example, due to the latter's continued allegiance to al-Qaeda, but has managed to establish a working relationship by demanding independent groups recognize the Salvation Government and avoid infighting. Hardline foreign fighters (within both Hurras al-Din and the Turkistan Islamic Party) also present a complication for HTS. HTS has mandated that these groups do not use Syria as a launching pad for international jihad.<sup>12</sup>

These agreements have worked for HTS in the past, but they are showing signs of strain following the Turkish-Russian ceasefire in March. On April 19, fighting broke out between HTS and Hurras al-Din in northwestern Idlib.<sup>13</sup> The incident was the result of an HTS attempt to close a Hurras al-Din office, leading Hurras al-Din to issue a statement condemning the move and criticizing HTS' unpopular plan to open a road crossing between territory controlled by HTS and the Syrian government.<sup>14</sup>

These more hardline groups are likely to continue to clash with HTS in the months to come, but none are positioned to challenge HTS' authority in Idlib. HTS is militarily superior, and controls nearly all money entering the area. For its part HTS is also unlikely to directly confront more hardline groups. Instead, HTS most likely will seek to demonstrate its usefulness by controlling these transnational jihadists.

### Looking Ahead

To secure its future, HTS will need to strike a balance between adherence to its revolutionary ideals and demonstrating its utility to international actors – in particular Turkey. Too docile a position will lead to more internal strife, while too aggressive a position will anger Turkey and expose HTS to external attacks. For the time being, with Turkey focused on Libya and the coronavirus pandemic distracting all, the need for stable governance in Idlib means that HTS' utility outweighs its undesirability.

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<sup>11</sup> "تحرير الشام" توضح موقفها من تهديد مقاتلين للجنود الأتراك في ريف إدلب", *Enab Baladi*, April 16, 2020, [https://enabbaladi.net/archives/377497?fbclid=IwAR2hzvBAhOJ9LEt\\_zcK0r274TTEcaP5-zsYtxs5yiwB9J29KnGbw5sfRw-l](https://enabbaladi.net/archives/377497?fbclid=IwAR2hzvBAhOJ9LEt_zcK0r274TTEcaP5-zsYtxs5yiwB9J29KnGbw5sfRw-l)

<sup>12</sup> "The Jihadist Factor in Syria's Idlib: A Conversation with Abu Muhammad Al-Jolani." International Crisis Group, February 20, 2020. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/jihadist-factor-syrias-idlib-conversation-abu-muhammad-al-jolani>.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Khateb, Khaled, "Defections Threaten Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib", *Al Monitor*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/syria-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-qaeda-defections-tension.html>

<sup>14</sup> "HTS Clamps Down on 'Hurras al-Din' and the Jihadi Groups", *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, April 19, 2020, <http://www.syriaahr.com/en/?p=160773>

In the longer-term future, HTS' position appears untenable. Given the group's history and uncompromising stance, it seems unlikely that they will be able to abide by a long-term ceasefire without fragmenting. Turkey, which has worked closely with HTS in the past, has clearly favored its rivals in the SNA and NLF, and continues to invest in them militarily and politically. If HTS comes into conflict with Turkish interests in Idleb, Turkey has a replacement option on hand, as well as the military strength and international mandate to move against HTS.

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