



The Naturalization of Violent Extremists: With Focus on the Emergence of the Levant Liberation Organization (HTS, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) as a Political Entity in Idlib

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I. Introduction

One of the most important topics in international politics of the 21st century is violent extremism. Violent extremism manifests itself in a very different way from international conflicts caused by far-right nationalist fascism or communist ideology. This is because the rise of non-state actors and the inadequate response from the international community lead to extreme confusion. There were frequent occurrences of conflicts that were different from the usual conflicts that ultimately developed into conventional wars. This should be viewed as a new inflection point in international politics.

In the traditional study of international politics, especially in realpolitik theories, state actors were the main subject of analysis. When the theory of East-West blocs disappeared with the Cold War, the US became the only dominant power in the world. The US continued to be the sole superpower, unrivaled by any other state. Although states are still the unit of analysis, there was now a super-state that could control all other states. The US dominance, however, came to a stop. Ten years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, precisely on September 11, 2001, a new fault line was drawn. The leading power that threatened the US was not a state. A new variable for conflict had emerged: violent extremism, and in particular, the variable that used the "clash of civilizations" theory as their tool.

After the 9.11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the US declared a war on terror. The target was al-Qaeda with Osama bin Laden as its leader. The new US foreign strategy based on the Bush doctrine led to the war in Afghanistan followed by the war in Iraq. The US, which fought the far-right nationalist fascists in World War II and led the war against the Soviets during the Cold War, now had begun a war against religious extremism rather than a nationalist ideology or communist ideology.

The war against Iraq which was the first target among suspicious states that supporting al-Qaeda and similar extremist forces, i.e. the "Axis of Evil"¹) ended swiftly. Saddam Hussein's brutal regime collapsed, and Iraq was expected to become a democratic state

ruled by Shiite bloc. It seemed that the US had partially achieved its goal of eradicating destructive and dissimilar extremist forces by instilling the "Democratic Peace Theory."²⁾

The collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan along with regime change in Iraq reaffirmed US's overwhelming firepower and its status as the world's superpower. However, it wasn't long before this turned out to be an illusion. Although al-Qaeda's headquarter collapsed and bin Laden was killed, an Islamic extremist force more brutal than and different from al-Qaeda emerged. It was called the "Islamic State (IS)."

IS terrorized the world for roughly five years. The impact on the international community was significant. Although al-Qaeda, the lead perpetrator of 9/11, was incapacitated and its core leadership removed, another terrorist force had immediately emerged. This clearly indicates that the US did not succeed in its war on terror. The international community once again focused on fighting IS. Things started to change in the fall of 2019 when IS lost its strongholds and started to disintegrate as members scattered throughout Syria and Iraq.

The organizational breakdown of IS did not mean the end of violent extremism. The extremists made various attempts at survival. When IS forces started to weaken due to a series of airstrikes by coalition forces and ground assaults by militias, the leadership started to move base. The new destinations were usually countries in continuous disarray and where public authority had ceased to function. There were signs of personnel and supplies moving to Libya, Yemen, and eastern Afghanistan. This was how IS started to form a type of franchised network of international terrorism.

In addition to relocating its base, another way to survive emerged. It was "naturalization." IS which was an extrapolated variant tried to create a state-like governance structure in Syria and Iraq. If the previous al-Qaeda was a terrorist group distanced from and inaccessible to the public, IS went out on the streets. They created an organization that functioned based on tax revenue and expenditures. Attempts were made to build a governance structure, and *wilayats* (a type of Islamic administrative unit) were established and carried out equipped with judiciary, security, public administration, and welfare functions. This was completely different from al-Qaeda. It gave the appearance of looking after the needs of the people, and in its own way, simulated a rudimentary institutionalized entity.

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- 1) After 9/11, the US conducted thorough investigations and formulated a national policy against terrorism. The US president subsequently declared war on terror in his 2002 State of the Union address. Afterwards, states that sponsored terrorism or sought to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) were called the Axis of Evil. The US announced that the states constituting the Axis of Evil, namely Iran, Iraq and North Korea, could be subject to regime transformation or regime change unless they changed behavior. The Iraq War took place in March, 2003. The term Axis of Evil sparked controversy and questions regarding the strategic intention of the US, because the idea was about establishing an arch-enemy of a sort in the war on terror but included regimes unrelated to al-Qaeda.
 - 2) A theory that all-out wars do not take place between states where democracy has taken root. The assumption is that better exchange of views between the government and people, rational dialogue between states, and mechanism of judgement on how to deter war work to prevent wars from occurring. The Bush administration believed that authoritarian regimes had to be dissolved to end the chronic crisis of conflict in the Middle East and that democratization could prevent inter-state wars.

After the fall of IS, these attempts at naturalization took on another form at a different level. Although IS itself had weakened and started to dissolve, new cell organizations took its place and pursued strategies for survival. Numerous organizations appeared and disappeared, but one group that naturalized in the tumultuous region around Idlib of Syria is worth noting. The group is called Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

HTS has taken a unique path. It unmistakably stemmed from violent extremism, evidenced by its close relationship with the genesis of al-Qaeda and IS. However, HTS is attempting to establish a new governance system by forming connections with political actors of the establishment. This is a peculiar endeavor to take place in Idlib, a place where government forces and opposition forces continue fighting and where a quasi-international war involving Russia and Turkey is unfolding.

The emergence of an organized Islamic political group evolving from al-Qaeda, the original source of terrorism by remote control, going through IS, which sought to form a caliphate state, and finally taking root in a certain locality should not be taken lightly. What is their future? Are they following the guidance of disguise in order to survive and expand while concealing their radical ideology? Or is it merely the outcome of a fundamental change in character and subsequent realization that a political movement without public support is meaningless?

This policy report aims to trace the path of a violent extremist group naturalizing and reinventing itself in a specific region, and by doing so, examine the potential impact such attempts could have on the future of international terrorism. Various implications are examined, including the possibility that the existence of this naturalized group influenced soft target terrorism³⁾ which has recently been on the rise and spreading outward from Europe including France.

II. Background: Civil War of Syria

A. The Protracted Social Conflict (PSC)

Extremist terrorism aims at cell division and growth which are nurtured by instability and turmoil. The civil war in Syria provided the perfect condition for the proliferation of terrorism. Starting in 2011 during the time of political upheaval in Arab states, the 10-year long Syrian civil war had already entered the phase of protracted social conflict (PSC). PSC is a state in which the disputed issue has become so entrenched that it is almost impossible to reach a political agreement. It means that the possibility of resolving the dispute through a political resolution or agreement is so remote that the civil war or

3) Soft target terror is an act of terror that destroys ordinary events taking place in ordinary sites. It is a violent act that occurs without warning at festivals, movie theatres and performance venues. The fact that a mid-to-large scale killing takes place in an unprotected site means living in peace is no longer possible. The resulting fear and distrust of others among the public will raise the violence index and lead to a vicious cycle. This is exactly what the terrorists want.

ongoing conflict in a country or region is now embedded. It refers to a dispute structure no longer defined by a visible confrontation between two groups, but one that has become more complex with disputes taking place between multiple groups of society.

When conflict becomes a constant, causality is blurred. At first, the cause is clear, but as time goes by, people have only a vague notion of why they are fighting each other. Although the cause is almost forgotten, the anger and hostility generated in the process feed on each other and become a cause in itself. All the while, members of society become desensitized and start to perceive conflict as a fact of life. When this happens, numerous disputing parties will try to secure their own territory.

When the conflict becomes protracted, the main actors in the conflict will come out into the open and further complicate the situation. The fault lines become blurred, and even the disputed issue continues to shift, making it more complex and difficult to find a solution. The actors of the conflict will proclaim their objectives and make themselves visible. The increased complexity and diversification of the conflict further weaken the government's power to control the situation. As a result, the national community becomes more disarticulated and the individual actors start taking measures to establish themselves as physical entities to secure power.

Initially, there was a high possibility that the civil war would develop into a revolution much like the political events that took place in Tunisia and Egypt. The situation was interpreted as a power struggle between the Syrian central government of Bashar al-Assad and the opposing Sunni rebels. However, as foreign state actors, such as Russia and Iran, became involved, the domestic conflict turned into an international conflict. In the process, major Sunni Islamist forces dispersed throughout the Middle East started to intervene in earnest. The complex web of different actors in the civil war provided a rich soil for violent extremism.

While the civil war was becoming more complex and multi-sided, tribalism grew stronger within the country. This is evidence to people's tendency to hold on to their primary group based on their identity during times of uncertainty and unrest. Along with the rise of tribalism, factional disputes intensified within the region. The dynamics between US and Russia, two powers outside the region, got meshed with the conflict over political identity. The civil war between the regime and the opposition developed in a complex pattern. It was not a civil revolution which is simply a confrontation between the regime and citizens. When tribes, religious sects, and foreign powers allied together, the Assad regime took advantage of this situation to secure power by propagandizing the civil war as an anti-terrorism war.

As the actors became more diverse and the social conflict became protracted, individual groups sought to secure power and engaged in armed conflict. Eventually, the situation reached a point where a solution could not be found without the dissolution or dismemberment of the state. It was in this context that groups adhering to the traditional Islamic principle of armed struggle and originating from violent extremism emerged. They each sought to secure a political stake and furthermore to be recognized as a sustainable political entity. This seems to have been the motive for naturalization. It was a great

opportunity to establish solid positions for themselves in the midst of confusion.

B. Turkey's Involvement and Syria Becoming a Battleground

The increasingly complex, diversified, and protracted domestic situation became further convoluted when it was intertwined with international politics. The Syrian civil war became the nexus of international and domestic politics. It became a three-way war. A series of linkages, i.e. coupling between countries took place resulting in an 'Iran-Russia-Assad' vs. 'Turkish-Syrian Turkish rebels' vs. 'US-Kurd militias' structure. Turkey was at the center of this web of alliances created by the three-way confrontation.

In terms of international politics, the most contentious issue in the Syrian civil war was the conflict between Turkey and the Kurds. The Kurdish stronghold in the east bank of the Euphrates River in northeastern Syria is a key strategic point. This area, adjacent to Tabqa (or al-Thawra) dam, produces more than half of Syria's energy and is a major grain production area. It was here, the area surrounding this Kurdish long-standing stronghold, in which the IS declared the establishment of a caliphate state.

In order to repel IS forces, the US joined hands with the Kurdish militia, the most combative of the local ground forces. The US which does not deploy ground forces in the Middle East, needed a partner to conduct ground operations. The US supported the Syrian Kurdish militia "Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG)⁴⁾" with airstrikes, precision-guided surface bombing, and training of tactical doctrines. At the same time, because the US was able to use YPG as foot soldiers, in return, YPG established itself as a leading military partner of the US in the region.

This triggered a strong response from Turkey which considered the Kurds to be a hostile force. If the things continued on, the Kurds were likely to acquire a certain stake in the eastern region of the Euphrates. If they gained autonomy, like the Iraqi Kurd, and established an autonomous government in Syria, Turkey would be seriously troubled. This is because the Kurdish Labor Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK), which leads an anti-Turkey movement and is much more antagonistic than the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, had great affinity with YPG. In other words, if the Syrian Kurds were to gain autonomy, it was likely to form associations with PKK across the Turkish border.

Turkey considered the US's support of the Kurds as an encroachment of its sovereignty. It argued that it was possible for the Syrian Kurdish YPG and the PKK, the anti-government group of ethnic Kurds in Turkey, to form a coalition. Turkey defines PKK as a subversive force and a terrorist group. Turkey opposed the US maintaining that PKK's alliance with YPG was a direct threat against its security. The objection was based on the fact that the US would be supporting a group which was an internal threat to its ally.

4) A militia consisting of ethnic Kurds and formed in 2011 when the Syrian Civil War began. YPG mostly operates in northeastern Syria (East of the Euphrates). It engaged in a ground battle with IS and helped to bring down the IS stronghold. But it is pressured by Turkey who is worried about its potential alliance with the Kurdish Labor Party (PKK).

Turkey intervened not only in the Kurdish stronghold in eastern Syria, but also in the northwestern Afrin region, another area populated with Kurds. Turkey intervened directly because there were Turkish residents living there as well. Turkey took substantive actions to link the region with the border city Gaziantep and include the city in the Turkish sphere of influence. Turkey strengthened its presence from northeastern to northwestern regions of Syria.

Turkey's Kurd-related involvement all across northern Syria meant increasing pressure from foreign powers and a worse situation for local residents. There was a surge of resentment among the locals of Northern Syria toward the Assad government in Damascus as well as against the aggressively advancing Turkey, a foreign power. After a long period of oppression and assault by the central government and intervention by Turkey, the quality of life of the residents seriously deteriorated. The conflict which lasted for nearly 10 years had fueled the people's desire for a governance system that will bring stability to the area.

C. The US Retracts and Russia Advances

After taking office, the Obama administration sought to noticeably scale down its involvement in the Middle East. This was a consequence of the Iraq war. The "Asia rebalancing" or "pivot to Asia" strategy did not just mean shifting the central axis eastward to keep China in check. It was an effort to get US diplomatic strategy out of an overall crisis caused by the Bush administrations' failed operation to stabilize Iraq after intervening to promote democracy in the region. Obama's policy was a result of learning a lesson that any attempts to change the landscape of the Middle East through artificial intervention would ultimately fail. The Trump administration also continued with this policy, albeit through different means. The US under Trump decided to opt for isolationism and to withdraw its forces from the Middle East, because it was consuming manpower and war funding. The difference, however, was that the Obama administration pursued a more meticulous offshore balancing, while the Trump administration tied profit-seeking with force withdrawal instead of taking a more strategic approach. The former sought a hostile balance in the Middle East through Iran's nuclear deal, and the latter sought to retract by withdrawing from the Iranian nuclear deal, pressuring Iran, and forming an anti-Iranian front with other states.

The US's exit from the complex Middle East meant the entry of another foreign power. The Syrian civil war revealed the presence of Russia who had supported Assad. Russia tried not to repeat the mistakes the US made in Iraq. Instead of "regime change and occupation for stabilization," Russia focused on its clear objective of protecting the Assad regime.

Russia did not try to intervene actively, that is, to make Syria pro-Russian by deploying large-scale ground forces throughout the Middle East. Nor did it actively seek to visibly expand its influence. Instead, Russia chose to protect even authoritarian and oppressive regimes by emphasizing the principle of equal-sovereignty and non-interference. In the process, Russia dramatically enhanced its presence in Syria. It must be noted that, many authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and Africa considered Russia to be more dependable, because other democratic nations were intervening in these regimes the

principle of "Responsibility to Protect (R2P)."

There were realistic issues as well. Russia was still subject to sanctions after its annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, and thus, could not deploy large-scale strategic assets. Instead, Russia chose to provide diplomatic support in order to defend pro-Russian regimes on multilateral platforms, such as the UN Security Council. When negotiations were stalemated in disputed areas, Russia sought a political settlement in any form so as long as it could maintain its influence.

The Astana peace talks is a leading example of Russia expanding its influence. Replacing the UN-led Geneva series of conferences, the Astana process is based on a new formula where Russia leads, and Turkey and Iran participate as main actors. It is becoming the main stage for Syrian political negotiations. The Astana Peace Talks initiative was conceived as a forum for discussing and seeking a political solution to Syria, a country devastated by the protracted civil war. However, in reality, the diverging interests and calculations of the involved parties have bogged down the process. The following are the differences that surfaced.

- Russia: Wants to stabilize the situation through Assad's partial concession (Seeks non-subordination of Assad)
- Iran: Seeks to make the Assad government and pro-Iranian factions in Syria more dependent on Iran
- Turkey: Wants to weaken and dissipate Kurdish forces in Syria (starting with isolation)
- US: Wants to keep Assad in check through the Kurds
- Proceeding in the direction of partitioning Syria

Russia did not engage in a broad-based and proactive counter-terrorism war like the US or the West. Of course, it did join the multinational air strikes to sever the tie between anti-Russian Islamic terrorist groups and IS. However, the degree of involvement was markedly different from that of the US and Western countries in NATO. But Russia had increased its soft power. It is quite ironic considering that it was always the West that pursued a free international order based on values, whereas Russia always had a strong affinity with authoritarianism

The diminished presence of the US and the entry of Russia in the Middle East resulted in the conflict becoming more complex, diversified, and protracted. These elements created an ideal environment for the naturalization of violent extremist groups and formed the background for the naturalization and contextualization of HTS. Without any mechanism for compromise and concessions, more regions become void of any public authority or international political influences, and the residents lived in destitution. The dire situations served as an opportunity for powerful ideological political groups to emerge. A new actor appeared in front of the residents who were tired with IS's extremist policies and brutal way of governance. It was a naturalized group that behaved differently but still maintained the fundamentalist Islamic ideology. The public's aspiration for a new entity who would be a strong guardian and insurgent fighter also played an important part.

D. Structure of Opposition Forces

The opposition forces in Syria can be roughly divided into three groups. These are: 1) the Syrian National Council which claims to be the largest rebel force and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) under the Council, 2) the traditional Islamist fighters (Salafist), and 3) the violent extremist groups, etc. Each group formed their own frontline and continued to fight the Assad government.

(1) Moderate Legitimate Organizations: The Syrian National Coalition (SNC) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA)

The Syrian National Coalition (SNC) is an organization which has gained international legitimacy. SNC is leading group and the only legitimate organization recognized by "Friends of Syria," a body formed in April 2012 by 83 countries. Bruhan Ghalioun, a professor at the Université de Paris III Sorbonne University in Paris, was the first chair of the Council. Later, the Council formed affiliations with secularist groups, the Muslim Brotherhood and ethnic Kurds, but the affiliation weakened afterwards.

Professor Ghalioun, a Sunni native from Homs, was a moderate who advocated gradual reforms. However, due to his moderate character, he was forced out of power by hardliners in the organization. Later, George Sabra of the Muslim Brotherhood succeeded as the chair. The Council's members, however, were mostly from abroad which meant it lacked organizational capacity and support from within the country. The Council lost strength with the emergence of IS.

On the international stage, SNC seemed to be the legitimate representative recognized by the Syrian rebels. However, when it came to fighting within Syria, SNC was considered to be far inferior to violent extremist forces in terms of combat capabilities. Despite political legitimacy and a broad base, SNC soon revealed its limits and weakened due its lack of firepower and ambiguity in its policy stance.

FSA is the armed group which adopted the same ideology with SNC. It consisted of moderate Sunni Islamists, militias and deserters from the Syrian military. But recently, due to the group's non-hierarchical structure, the FSA rapidly lost power and dispersed as an increasing number of rebel groups left the organization. The US and the international community have provided non-lethal munitions and humanitarian relief supplies to FSA as a group under the umbrella of SNC, the internationally authorized representative of Syrian opposition groups. However, due to inability to maintain tight control of the military supplies and the disintegration of its cells, FSA gradually lost its fighting capabilities. It can be said that, in the end, none of the opposition forces were effectively resisting the Syrian government except for the Kurdish militia.

(2) Islamic Traditionalist Forces: the "Islamic Front" with Salafist Jihadist Ideologies

Unlike the SNC, which started to operate on the international stage after gaining legitimacy, there was another group in Syria that represented Islam. It was called the

"Islamic Front," a group that advocated a return to the traditions of the Islamic ancestors or "Salafi." The group formed a separate force and engaged against the government. Of the estimated 100,000 and 120,000 of total rebel force members, 45,000 and 60,000 are estimated to be members of the Islamic Front. The Islamic Front was formed by the union of various Islamic groups in Syria on November 22, 2013. But the union began to weaken as combat forces were scattered throughout the IS frontline.

※ Six member groups including Ahrar al-Sham, Jaish al-Islam, Suqour al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Ansar al-Sham, and Ah-Haq Brigade formed a coalition.

The Islamic Front set as their ultimate goal the building of "Islamic Republic of Syria" ruled by Shari'a. It attempted to build a traditionalist theocratic Islam republic based on a powerful Islamic doctrine. Although the Islamic Front belonged to the Sunni sect, there is a semblance to the Iranian republican model which established a Shiite Islamic Republic. Because they were ideologically united and fighting for the same religious cause, the Islamic Front was superior to the FSA of SNC in terms of organization and fighting capabilities.

The Islamic Front not only fought against the Syrian government forces, but also the FSA. Instead of forming a single, united front with other rebel forces, the Islamic Front was preoccupied with religious doctrines and clashed with the secular groups. In December 2013, they raided bases and warehouses of FSA, also a rebel force, and seized weapons and military equipment. From this point on, the two groups were at odds with each other, and there was a sharp decrease in the supplies the West provided to FSA.

(3) Violent Extremism: IS and Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Nusra Front)

The two major opposition forces, the moderate and rational FSA and the Islamic Front that follows the Salafist doctrine, were affiliated with foreign states, gained a certain degree of legitimacy, and continued their fight against the government. Meanwhile, violent extremist groups also got involved in the civil war, declaring their participation in the anti-Assad front. These groups were the al-Nusra Front and IS. Both were internationally notorious for their militant ideologies. IS is a self-established organization and a representative variant of al-Qaeda. It is somewhat like a foreign legion since its members are mostly overseas jihadists. Until IS officially withdrew from Syria and Iraq in 2019, it was considered one of the most combative rebel forces in the Middle East.

IS rejected the line of command headed by Ayman al-Zawahiri, the chief commander of al-Qaeda Prime (AQP). Acting independently, IS continued to commit cruel and violent acts of terror. The IS did not differentiate between government and rebel forces, and carried out killings for its own political goals. In this process, IS undermined the unity of rebel forces. IS would frequently denounce other rebel groups as non-Islamic and stated that they should be punished, inevitably weakening the opposition forces. Its actions were a decisive factor that prolonged the Syrian civil war and made it drift aimlessly. However, while both the FSA and the Islamic front did not have the capacity to fight the government forces, these extremist groups had built up combat capabilities since the Iraq war, and thus had an upper hand in the inter-group power dynamics of opposition forces.

Syria's Assad government forces took advantage of this situation. They cited IS as an example and propagandized that the rebel forces were the equivalent of terrorists. The IS allied with Sunni rebels in the Anbar state in western Iraq, constantly crossing the Syrian border and increasing instability in the region. This enraged all members of the international community. From the early days following the announcement of its establishment in 2014, IS repeatedly took foreign hostages and beheaded them. Its brutal actions eventually forced other countries to intervene. International criticism of Assad for massacring his own citizens in addition to suspected use of banned chemical weapons and barrel bombs, began to be redirected toward IS. The Assad government, which was forced into a corner in the early stages of the civil war, now had the opportunity to recover thanks to IS. Eventually, after the international coalition forces repelled IS forces, IS was officially dismantled in Syria in the first half of 2019.

An IS faction worth noting is the al-Nusra Front. Al-Nusra Front was the precursor of HTS which later naturalized in northern Syria. It was a violent extremist group founded on al-Qaeda's doctrine and tactics. Afterwards, IS attracted more attention and was recognized as the leading violent extremist force in Syria and Iraq. However, when IS started to disintegrate, al-Nusra Front emerged to the front. This is because, unlike IS which forced medieval Islamic principles on the people despite the intense criticism from the international community, al-Nusra Front heeded to the needs of the mass, attempted naturalization, and locally established itself as HTS.

III. The Emergence of HTS⁵⁾ : A brief history

A. Formation of al-Nusra Front

As discussed earlier, al-Nusra Front originated from al-Qaeda. After bin Laden, Jawahiri, who was the leader of the Al Qaeda Headquarters (AQP), expanded and restructured the "Jabhat al-Tawhid al-Jihad" headed by Abu Musab al-Zarkawi, the leader of al-Qaeda factions in Iraq. Based on this group, Jawahiri established al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). It was analogous to reopening a shop after expansion. The group had built up its fighting skills during the Iraqi war and unlike the al-Qaeda headquarters which was rapidly disintegrating in Waziristan, Afghanistan, AQI was full of energy and drive to engage in combat.

At the outset of the Syrian Civil War in late 2011, the then head of AQI, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, tried to cleave cells and expand the organization. When the Civil War intensified, he sent Abu Muhammad al-Julani to Syria with instructions to establish a new Syrian branch of AQI to overthrow of the Assad regime. Thus, al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda franchise in Syria, was formed.

From the beginning, Zawahiri proclaimed that the al-Nusra Front was the direct branch

5) <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/hay'-tahrir-al-sham>

and authentic body of Al Qaeda in Syria. This was to give legitimacy to al-Nusra as a terrorist organization and to declare that the 9/11 spirit would be succeeded. From this point on, al-Nusra Front engaged in armed assaults out of its base in eastern Syria. It was effectively a diversionary tactic where AQI operated in Iraq and al-Nusra Front in Syria but based on the same al-Qaeda doctrine and ideology.

Al-Nusra Front was funded by the support from AQI, external sponsorship, collecting taxes and seized assets in occupied territories. However, after gaining control of some parts of the oil field in Eastern Syria, it had a steady source of income from the locally produced crude oil. Militarily, it coordinated operations with a prominent Sunni rebel group, Ahrar al-Sham (Salafist Jihad Group) and other opposition groups. Al-Nusra Front worked hard to spread the notion throughout the region that the revolution in Syria could only succeed through military coordination with al-Nusra.

Although al-Nusra Front was formed by the initiative of Zawahiri, Julani succeeded in becoming more influential and gradually gained independence. Julani, a Syrian national originally named Ahmed Hussein al-Shar'a started to use a nom de guerre that referred to the Golan Heights (Golan's Arabic pronunciation is Julani)⁶, a former Syrian territory now occupied by Israel. He went to Iraq at the outbreak of the 2003 Iraq War, became the trusted follower of Zarqawi, the main assailant responsible for beheading Kim Sun-il. Julani was captured by US forces while he was in a guerilla fight against the US. After Zarqawi died in a US drone attack in 2006, Zulani escaped from a US military prison camp and began working with Baghdadi.

B. Conflict and Independence with AQI

In April 2013, tensions rose between Baghdadi, the leader of AQI, and al-Nusra Front. This was because he declared the establishment of IS and a caliphate state without prior consultation with AQI or al-Nusra Front. Baghdadi also approached the jihadists of al-Nusra front. He tried to convince them to join IS. Eventually, IS merged with al-Nusra Front. Once the announcement was made that the al-Qaeda franchise, al-Nusra Front, had been merged with IS, a rival of al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda and al-Nusra Front started to disassociate and eventually parted.

However, soon afterwards IS and al-Nusra Front also split. There was continued infighting among the different factions. Julani said that al-Nusra Front was an independent branch of al-Qaeda and loyal to the al-Qaeda leader Zawahiri. He took the necessary steps to become independent following the declaration that it was separating from the IS of Baghdadi. Apparently, there was conflict or some sort of jealousy among the leaders. In fact, al-Nusra Front and IS, which were not that different in their original ideologies, split up due to dissension among the leaders. Although they were similar organizations, the character of the two groups diverged even further after they split up. The IS became much more violent, and al-Nusra Front appeared to be moderate in comparison.

Between late 2014 and early 2015, al-Nusra Front moved west from Raqqa, the former IS

6) <https://world.time.com/2012/07/26/time-exclusive-meet-the-islamist-militants-fighting-alongside-syrias-rebels/>

stronghold, and mainly operated mainly in Idlib province in northwestern Syria. Its main affiliate organization was Jaysh al-Fatah (including Ahrar al-Sham). Through their combined operations and struggles, the rebel allied forces were able to oust the Assad regime from Idlib in June 2015. Although relatively weaker and smaller than IS, al-Nusra Front settled in Idlib and laid the foundation for its naturalization.

C. The Formation of HTS

In July 2016, al-Nusra Front severed its formal ties with al-Qaeda and renamed itself Jahat Fatah al-Sham. In the midst of intensifying infighting within Syrian rebels, in January 2017, Jamat Fatah Assham merged⁷⁾ four rebel groups, Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zanki, Liwa al-Haqq, Ansar al-Din, and Jaysh al-Sunnah and changed the name to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). At this time, Julani stepped down from the position of the leader of Jamat Pata Assam to facilitate the merger and showed himself to be on equal footing with the other leaders of the four major groups. Afterwards, he assumed the position of chief commander of the military maintaining de facto power and re-emerged as the leader in October. There was no violence or oppression in this process. Julani is said to have persuaded his colleagues and appears to have gone through the process of unifying the ideology, objective, and direction of the coalition.

After severing ties with al-Qaeda, HTS faced great challenges. A large part of the territory it previously controlled near Idlib was lost. In addition, it suffered from a weakening support base in the region, the assassination of key leaders, and the departure of senior leadership who went to Hurras al-Din. This was mostly the result of the repressive and brutal exercise of force by IS extremism.

It was in this process that the organization changed character. HTS sought to assume a character that was different from IS. It was in some ways, a third path. HTS, rooted in violent extremism, was relatively distanced from the existing Salafist Jihadism. The Salafists within the rebels were staunch traditionalists, but they were not violent. HTS had an ideological orientation closer to IS than the Salafists.

However, as HTS distanced itself from IS, it became closer to the Salafists because of how relational dynamics work. Accordingly, HTS started to make a shift towards orthodox conservative Islamism similar to the Salafist ideology, and made tangible efforts to translate the conservative Islam values into politics. This is the background behind the so-called naturalization of Islamic principles.

7) <https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/terrorism-backgrounders/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-hts>

IV. Organization of HTS

The total number of members or size of the force vary according to statistics, but HTS forces appear to be larger than other rebel groups in terms of its deployment in the war zones of northwestern Syria. HTS is known to have a fighting force of approximately 15,000-20,000 fighters.⁸⁾ This makes it the largest rebel force in Idlib province. In addition to its armed militants, HTS runs the National Salvation Government (NSG), a civilian-led alternative government. The precise statistics are unknown, but several thousands of administrative personnel are believed to be working there.

[Organization⁹⁾]



In terms of organization, at first glance, HTS does not appear to be functionally different from IS. However, there is a critical difference which is the status of the Shura Council. The Shura Council is the concept of a legislative body. The IS proclaimed the establishment of a caliphate state and introduced a governance system with four councils for each of the 16 *wilayats*. On the other hand, HTS had more subdivisions. The number of region-based units reduced to a minimum while the number of functional departments was increased. Eight key units were placed under the Shura Council which was the collective deliberative and consensus body, giving the appearance of better power distribution. Although Julani is very influential, it seems that HTS aimed to institutionalize a consultative body to distinguish itself from a caliph-centered one-man rule regime.

The governance structure of IS consists of bodies such as the Shari'a Council, Shura Council, Military Council, and Security Council, each under the command and control of Baghdadi. The structure of the orthodox Islamic caliphate state was restored and replicated to attract the interest of modern Muslims and induce their participation. In contrast, HTS modified the caliphate structure and applied the functions and organization of the modern parliamentary system. The public was more familiar with this modern system and was thus more receptive.

It is noteworthy that HTS placed the 1) Military Command 2) Political Negotiations Office

8) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-45401474>
12,000-15,000 fighters according to the UN in January, 2020. Syrian government supporters estimates the number to be around 100,000.

9) <https://southfront.org/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-history-capabilities-role-in-syrian-war/>

3) Media Department 4) Financial Affairs Office 5) General Directorates of Service 6) Courts 7) Dawah and Awareness Office and 8) Security under the Shura Council, This measure introduced a structure that amounts to the cabinet in the parliamentary system. HTS sought to follow the Islamic tradition by preserving the Shura, but modified the internal structure to make it more modern. At the same time, unlike the Shura Council of IS, which was subordinated under Baghdadi's one-man rule, HTS's Shura Council was established as the highest legislative body. It is different from the original Shura Council during the early Islamic caliph era. The original Shura was closer to that of IS. But, HTS makes a strong case in its explanation that "consensus (*ijma*)" which is the core value of Islam was being implemented through the Shura Council. This allowed HTS to clearly state its intention to institute a more moderate form of governance, and at the same time used this for internal and external propaganda.

V. Ideology, Goals, and Strategies

A. Ideology: From Salafi-Jihadism to Asharism

After parting with IS, HTS set its ruling ideology as Salafi-Jihadism. It was a shift to a political ideology which is based on the Salafi principle of returning to pure Sunni Islam and regarding Jihad, the use of physical violence, as the duty of Muslim individuals. It included the "Greater Jihad" concept. This conceptual shift meant that Jihad, which had been limited to passive acts of violence, was now replaced with a pure and non-violent religious passion. This led to a change in the nature of the organization. Furthermore, HTS has recently shown signs of an ideological transformation by embracing the moderate tendency of Asharism on top of its existing principle of Salafi-Jihadism.

HTS set Salafi-Jihadism as its ruling ideology after separating from IS. Based on the Salafi movement which seeks a return to pure Sunni Islam, the HTS shifted its political ideology to one that regards Jihad¹⁰⁾, the physical use of force, as the duty of all individual Muslims.¹¹⁾

Asharism, which takes an eclectic position of Sunni Islam theology, has been a traditional school that has taken root in Syria for a long time. The early Islam philosophy of governance was formed in the context of the two opposing schools of thought: the theory of free will and al-Mutazilah. The Mutazilites, who occupied a relatively dominant position, laid their philosophical foundation by explaining the principle of *Tawhid*, or the Oneness of God. Asharism took an eclectic position by preserving the framework of Mutazilah but adopting Greek speculative philosophy. In this process, emphasis was placed on human

10) Jihad which is often misunderstood as "holy war" because it represents violent struggle. However in the Islam tradition Jihad refers to "struggle or effort." The most important Jihad concepts are religious purity and holiness (Greater Jihad, al-Jihad al-Aqbar). On the other hand, violent struggle is allowed when the community is in crisis is called "Lesser Jihad (al-Jihad al-Asghar)."

11) https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR600/RR637/RAND_RR637.pdf
<https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-salafi-jihadist-threat>

judgment and free will. In a strange way, it was a return to the position of the theory of free will which the early Mutazilites opposed. Asharism is based on the logic that it is God's will to give some autonomy to man and God trusts in their ability to judge. Later, Asharism served as a basis for analogical reasoning (*qiyas*) and consensus (*ijma*), the two intangible sources of authority for the Islamic Sharia.

Asharism broadly interpreted the principle of monotheism. Going beyond the attributes of God that rests on a single rigid doctrine, Asharism argues that the essence of God is one but can be revealed to the world in various ways. The core argument is that one must acknowledge that God's justice is connected with human faith, and that human nature is not simply shaped by the obligation of subordination and obedience. Rather, man is an autonomous being capable of judging good vs. evil and beauty vs. ugliness. Therefore, the manifestation of God's justice is directly related to the good outcome resulting from man's judgment. Based on the premise that human rationality itself can have good attributes, the doctrine goes so far as to enable the use of various thoughts and judgments outside of the orthodox doctrine of Islam.

To make a comparison, Asharism could be similar to Korea's *Dongdo-seogi-ron*, the principle of maintaining Eastern ways while adopting modern technologies of the West. In other words, it is a doctrine that advocates the preservation of Islam ideology, values and thoughts, but not rejecting an eclectic development with the accommodation of various technologies and civilizations.

Asharism is diametrically opposed to the extremist affiliation and combatant behavior and tactics HTS had adopted since the days of al-Nusra Front. However, HTS needed a way to make the transition from its jihadist activities based on extremism by advocating the possibility of adopting a more moderate ideology. The framework for this ideological transition was borrowed from the Ashari tradition in Syria. HTS became accessible to other rebel forces in Syria who believed in Asharism. It served as a receptor that enabled cooperation without resistance.

Asharism has long been dismissed by al-Qaeda as a "traitor of the Islamic faith who seeks the middle road." It has been fiercely rejected by the so-called al-Qaeda mainstream theology and its followers were penalized like non-believers. However, HTS positioned Asharism to accommodate Islam rather than reject it. HTS had distanced itself with the existing extremist group that sought to establish a strict conservative caliphate state based on ideology. Furthermore, it became the ideological foundation to support a completely different behavior. In short, unlike IS and al-Qaeda, HTS accepted Syrian Asharism, a theology that values moderation, diversity and rationality, which meant pursuing a policy of assimilation. By broadening its position, the core foundation had been laid out for HTS's naturalization.

B. Goal: Institutionalization

The goal pursued by HTS is simple. It is to create an incubator for a new political body that encompasses various media, academia, and elites of the Syrian society, assimilate all groups including competing ones, and establish an institutional state¹²). HTS adhered to

Salafi-Jihadism which defended conservative traditionalism and justified armed combat, but simultaneously adopted the intermediate position of the Asharists. Through such actions, HTS attempted to lay the foundation for uniting various Sunni rebel groups.

HTS focused on building a "sustainable governing system" by expanding itself outward. It was completely novel to assume a political entity equivalent to the state and seek coexistence with the outside world. IS had also once declared itself to be a state. It was in 2014 that IS declared the restoration of the caliphate state of Islam, but it was not any different from the violent medieval society which cannot coexist with the modern world. But HTS took a different approach. In short, HTS tried to encompass all Islamism-based political movements in the world and create a "big tent" that could accommodate a broad spectrum of ideologies.

The underlying objective was the enlargement of HTS which would allow the inclusion of moderate Islamists of Syria, Sufism of nearby Turkey, Asharism, as well as the Muslim Brotherhood based on existing Salafiism. In this context, the ultimate goal and direction proclaimed by HTS was to demonstrate a political system that represented the Sunnis and the Islamic state. The new governance that HTS was looking to build precluded the violent traits of al-Qaeda or IS, an existing Islamic ideological governance system HTS had once pursued. Instead, it was pursuing a state model that was moderate but also embodied the doctrine of Islam.

C. Strategy

(1) Naturalization

HTS's strategy extends to naturalization. Through naturalization, HTS sought to perpetuate the Islam political entity. The distinctiveness of HTS was that it proposed the idea of "state" as an alternative to the Muslim Brotherhood or other secular factions. It emphasized Syria's identity as a nation state in the international community. Islam is not tied to a specific ethnicity. In principle, association with any particular state, tribe, and nation is considered taboo. Islam has always claimed itself as a value for the entire universe. This is global universalism. However, HTS declared that it would no longer insist on global Jihadism. It also declared that it would not oppose nationalism. This was a very forward-looking ideological shift. It can also be interpreted as a statement that HTS is ready to establish a legitimate, moderate government that prioritizes inclusiveness over fighting what is just.

In order to distinguish itself from other organizations such as IS¹³), HTS implemented a strategy to exclude foreigners. At the same time, it placed native Syrians in positions of influence. IS and al-Qaeda had encouraged multinational fighters to participate in the war. Sometimes, jihadists from overseas countries were given preferential treatment. On the

12) <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/hts-toning-down-the-jihadist-rhetoric-part-2>

13) IS attracted overseas jihadists from its early days, and they became the main special force fighters. These "Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF)" amount to 50 thousand in number. IS leadership gave preferential treatment to the FTFs: they received higher salaries than jihadists from Syria or Iraq and were given higher honorary titles.

other hand, HTS rejected and discriminated against Muslim fighters from foreign countries. Pure-blooded Syrians were selected for important positions. Foreign jihadists who were dissatisfied started to leave the organization, triggering a debate about this policy. It was a unique strategy.

Over time, HTS leader Julani began to promote a policy of coexistence and assimilation for various Islamic creeds and the Sunni jurists (*Madhab*) in the region. He chose to expand his influence by taking a stance of tolerance toward Sufism or Asharism. This was because substantive support for local governance could be obtained through the religious sects of the occupied region. It was going beyond being a political movement; it was an attempt to acquire the capacity to govern by consolidating support from Islamic creeds and legal scholars.

At the same time, the practice of governing changed. In order to naturalize, HTS began to show more moderate governance behavior than IS. It set up a civilian-led administrative branch called the "National Salvation Government" (NSG) with thousands of employees and began governing the whole of Idlib. The ramifications were great. The public started to positively respond to the efforts made to win the favor of local residents. A social safety net at the minimum level was put in place, and services and food were provided to the public. At the same time, a judicial system was introduced to enforce military, criminal, and the administrative laws.

(2) Consolidating and Unifying Rebel Forces

While the violent extremists gradually became separated from the public, HTS strived to become a focal point for rebel forces with Idlib at the center. It laid out the foundation for naturalization by establishing the NSG and expanding the administrative network. At the same time, it set out to improve its military capabilities and overhaul its strategy. In order to unify the opposition forces, HTS took the lead in merging the front lines. According to HTS, the purpose was to evade pressure from the powerful foreign states, and prevent inter-opposition infighting that only served the interest of the Assad regime and its allies. HTS asserted that a unified authority was needed for this purpose - a single authoritative body that could get things done, whether it was attaining peace through negotiations or conducting a war with a unified military.

Overall, it was an attempt to unite the fragmented Sunni Islamic rebel forces under the single banner of HTS. The argument was that it would strengthen HTS's position in future international negotiations, such as the Astana process or the Geneva process, and present a vision for post-Assad Syria. Although many of the initiatives were successful, once Turkey's intervention became apparent, the formation of a unified armed coalition still remains an unfinished task.

(3) Efforts to Create a "Living Space" (*Lebensraum*)

Not only violent extremisms such as al-Qaeda or IS, but the Salafists also were relentless when it came to fighting or resisting. They did not hesitate to adopt extreme strategies and tactics to implement the ideology of Islamic Jihad. However, there was always the

problem of sustainability. Basically, violence and resistance are effective for destroying the enemy for a while. It is effective as a momentary show of force. However, it is difficult to shape a long-term and stable alternative system. Violence lacks durability. Increasingly, the Islam world came to realize that earlier violent attempts were not enough to create a space for governance or to realize Islamic politics. Recognizing this, HTS endeavored to create a space for Islamic politics through a series of processes.

There is, of course, reason for doubt. Whether HTS was turning moderate because it really wanted to change or whether it was a tactical camouflage is a point of contention. It could be an attempt to deceive the public who were disillusioned with extremist Islamic political movements. Or it could be a structural transformation based on sincere introspection and a clear purpose to change and sustain itself. As of now, it is not easy to say. If HTS is consistently moderate and rational during the process of naturalization, the Muslim civilians who want change will see hope and new possibilities. However, it is difficult to determine how much HTS is committed to change. It is true that, while fighting the Assad government, HTS demonstrated brutal traits which reminded us of violent extremism.

For HTS, Idlib is an experimental space and an incubator of its *lebensraum*. It can be the optimal space to ensure its survival and safety, where HTS can maximize its capacity and emerge as a political entity at the quasi-state level. It is optimal, because the domestic and foreign relations are interwoven in a complex way, and there are a multitude of different actors. HTS has taken advantage of this confusion to carve out a space for its survival.

The main targets for HTS in enlarging its *lebensraum* are the Assad regime, Iran, and remnants of the IS. HTS deliberately avoids targeting civilians and the public. Violent incidents targeting civilians are known to be less than 6% of the total HTS-led armed assaults. The assault methods are mainly car bombings and suicide bombings. At first glance, HTS may appear to be just as violent as IS, but there are clear signs that HTS tries to avoid indiscriminate attacks on civilians. This is because the prime objective is to create a living space, or *lebensraum*, for its survival.

VI. Internal and External Dynamics

A. The Dynamics of Syrian Islamic Extremism: Al-Qaeda

Among HTS's recent activities, the most interesting one is the relationship it has established with al-Qaeda. This is because al-Qaeda was the first beginning of HTS and still exercises real influence. It is also the symbol of terrorism. Al-Nusra Front, which shared ideology, goals, and strategies with al-Qaeda, officially ended its affiliation in July 2016. In January 2017, it changed its name to HTS and began to change its ideology and strategy to make the distinction clearer. At the time, al-Qaeda's leader Zawahiri announced that HTS had betrayed al-Qaeda. This was because HTS had abandoned the Islam ideology and went against Allah's will in order to endorse Syrian nationalism which

was close to secularism. He condemned Julani and accused him for splitting from al-Qaeda and breaking the oath of loyalty out of his greed for power.

On the surface, it appears that HTS has completely severed ties with al-Qaeda, and so far there have been no signs that the relationship will be restored in any form. However, there are conflicting views on why HTS left al-Qaeda. First, there is the positive view that this was a sign that HTS was changing its traits. In other words, HTS came to the realization that in order to penetrate into the Syrian local community and be accepted by the locals, it had to shed the image of a violent extremist group. This also means that HTS came to realize that the violent behavior like that of al-Qaeda and IS, propaganda, or instigation tactics could no longer guarantee its long-term survival. On the other hand, there are those who believe that it was a tactical camouflage. Some argued that HTS was feinting change to avoid being targeted by the international community and was not really changing its fundamental ideology or goals. There is still some skepticism among members of the international community. The United Nations, the US and Turkey assume that HTS is still affiliated with al-Qaeda. In fact, it is difficult to accurately determine the truth on this matter.

B. Building Strategic Alliances with Other Countries: Turkey

During the Syrian Civil War, Turkey supported extremist forces and the Sunni rebels who had separated from the Kurds. Notably, it backed the National Liberation Front (NLF). However, things changed since the situation in Idlib reached an impasse. There are new signs that it is covertly supporting HTS. In September 2018, Russia and Turkey agreed to establish demilitarized zones in the Idlib and Afrin regions where war had raged on for a long time. But it didn't last long. The situation was expected to stabilize, but as the war escalated again from mid-2019 and the Russian/Assad government forces began to carry out attacks on the rebels,

The war became a proxy war of sorts and developed into a direct clash between Russia and Turkey. Turkey supported the HTS behind the scenes and joined with existing Sunni rebels to pressure Russia on two fronts. Turkey, on its side, was making a preemptive move against the increasing offensive of the Syrian and Russian military against Idlib which is next to the Turkish border.

Turkey was concerned that the local residents would be dislocated due to pressure from the Syrian government and Russian forces and become a large number of refugees. As of the second half of 2020, Turkey is facing great difficulties due to the influx of more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees. Turkey had to put a stop to the inflow of refugees and a local partner was needed to do that. HTS, which knew the local context well, assumed that role. Another motive behind Turkey's actions was to counter the Kurdish rebels who were based in northwestern Syria. Turkey needed a forward base in Syria in order to prevent the Kurdish rebels before they wreaked serious havoc. Turkey appears to have concluded that coordinating with HTS would make it easier to contain YPG which is a Kurdish rebel force.

HTS set up a protective operations system with the Turkish forces at the main strategic bases in Idlib. It is known that interoperability was first secured to enable joint military

operations. From HTS's perspective, if it remained an opposition force within Syria, it would not be able to withstand the firepower of Russian and government forces. But with the alignment with Turkey, it was now backed by Turkey's firepower and able to defend itself. At the same time, this had the effect of stopping the attacks of Russian and Assad government forces as Russia scaled down its offensives due to apprehension that the conflict might escalate into an international war.

It was also useful in terms of global politics. HTS needed a political safe haven that could prevent it being branded as a terrorist organization by the international community. Through alliance with Turkey, HTS not only sought to get direct protection, including protection from allied air strikes, but also to gain legitimacy for governing Idlib. This was how HTS were able to gain advantage over other Islamic sects with relatively little effort.

The alliance was also clearly useful for Turkey. The volatile regions of the Turkish border were always sensitive places requiring attention. If there was an armed group that was capable of controlling the area both militarily and administratively, Turkey obviously needs to ally with them. In this context, HTS was a valuable tool for pressuring Russia and the Assad regime during the political negotiations of Syria.

A more practical benefit was border control. Control of the Turkish-Syrian border means preventing human trafficking, blocking the entry of those on the wanted list for crimes related with Turkey security as well as sleeping cell members of IS. The division among opposition forces in Syria increased HTS's dependence on Turkey. This was a golden opportunity for Turkey as well. As HTS's dependence on Turkey grew, Turkey's control over HTS became stronger. In effect, Turkey could use one of the strongest actors in Syria any way it wanted. This control was used as leverage to pressure HTS to agree to a ceasefire, to reopen the road between Aleppo and Latakia, and to merge with Turkish-backed factions.¹⁴⁾

C. The Recent (2019-2020) Situation in Idlib

In January 2019, HTS launched a successful massive offensive against the Turkish-backed rebel alliance, the NLF. As a result, it took control of Aleppo, northern Hama and southern Idlib, becoming the most powerful armed group in northern Syria. Up until this point, Turkey and HTS were hostile toward each other. At the end of April 2019, Syrian government forces and Russian forces stepped up their offensive against HTS, and caused a large number of casualties and refugees. Tensions rose as Turkish military guard posts were attacked. The Turkish-backed rebel coalition NLF tactically joined hands with HTS. It was a sort of a competitive partnership formed against the offensive of government forces. Afterwards, armed disputes continued to occur between Syrian government forces, rebels, Turkish forces and Russian forces, and the situation in Idlib deteriorated rapidly.

On March 5, 2020, Russia and Turkey agreed to a ceasefire. Russia and Iran supported the Syrian military forces under Assad, Turkey supported the Syrian rebels, and Russia demanded that Turkey take responsibility for any provocations of rebel forces, including

14) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/19/idlib-faces-a-fearsome-future-islamist-rule-or-mass-murder-syria-civil-war-hayat-tahrir-al-sham/>

the HTS. However, Turkey did not clearly intervene on this matter, and there was no progress. This is why HTS continues to be an obstacle and variable in solving the Idlib crisis. In the end, HTS announced that it would not comply with the Russia-Turkey ceasefire agreement and at the same time, continued to engage in local scale battles and pressured the government forces.

VII. Conclusion

At this time, there are intermittent clashes between pro-government and anti-government forces and between Islamic political groups within Idlib. But it is not an all-out armed conflict. Some analysts say that the Russian-Turkey ceasefire agreement is a means to prepare for resuming the war.¹⁵⁾ Therefore, the situation of Idlib is structurally difficult to stabilize in the future.

The stabilization process is not expected to be smooth, and there are concerns that Idlib could become a kind of liberation zone due to the dominance of HTS and the increasing role of Turkey in the region. As of now, it is highly likely that once stabilized, Idlib will become another Gaza — besieged, long-term cease fire, and ruled by Islamic authoritarian groups.

If the Syrian government forces retake Idlib, the Assad regime could accuse the residents of being brainwashed by the rebels and carry out a mass killing, which is a cause for great concern. In conclusion, despite many attempts, the chances of a soft-landing through political negotiations are remote, and the state of PSC (Protracted Social Conflict) is expected to continue.

In the mid- to long-term, HTS has no choice but to maintain its linkage with Turkey. This means Idlib will remain under Turkish influence. Internally, HTS could manage to survive as a significant political actor through naturalization, but in the end, the dilemma of having to rely on the support of external forces continues. Whether HTS, which had no choice but to tactically cooperate with Turkey, will be able to maintain linkage with Turkey is an important variable for the situation in Syria as well. This is because it is closely related to whether or not northwestern Syria becomes a semi-colonial region. Turkey's aggressive actions of freely crossing the border to conduct military operations will eventually destabilize the region, and perpetuate the vicious cycle of foreign involvement in Syria's internal politics.

15) <https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/The-future-of-Idlib-620514>

[Table 1] The Evolution of Violent Extremism

1 st generation (al-Qaeda 1.0)	2 nd generation (al-Qaeda 2.0)	3 rd generation (al-Qaeda 3.0)	4 th generation (ISIS 1.0)	5 th generation (ISIS 2.0)	6 th generation? (HTS)
1990-2001	2001-2011	2011-2014	2014 - 2019	2019	2020 -
infancy, maturing period	fighting period	transitional, expanding period	change period	penetration & expansion period	naturalization & localization
elitism / tight hierarchical structure	loose hierarchical structure	network structure	state government structure	individuals / regional	organization / regional structure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Mujahidin returns home · Secures organization and fighting base · Strengthens anti-US ideology · Plans and executes 9.11 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Bush doctrine · War on Terror · Relocates / disperses home base · Iraq situation deteriorates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Bin-Laden killed · Political volatility in Arab region · US withdraws · DIY tactics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Establishment of an Islamic state · Increasing brutality · Use of new media · Increasing terrorist threats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Proliferation of global terrorism · Increasing anonymous terrorism · Nomadic terrorism · Weakening international coordination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Civil War deadlocked · Recruits locals · Seeks institutionalization · Uncertain future
Osama bin Laden	Osama bin Laden, Abu Musab al-Zarkawi	Ayman al-Zawahiri, Anwar al-Awlaki	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	Various region-based leadership structure	Abu Muhammad al-Julani

The key issue is whether HTS can be defined as the 6th generation of violent extremism. That is, whether it will first safely settle as a locally embedded group through tactical camouflage and then re-engage in global jihadism in the future. At present, it is difficult to say. However, the general view is that it is hard to believe that HTS's acceptance of Asharism as the crux of its governing principle and its emphasis on free will and rationality are all deceptions. The initial intention may have been to camouflage itself, but it's possible that the organization actually transformed its nature as time passed and put down its root to govern the region. In this case, HTS should be interpreted by a completely new framework as Islamic fundamentalists and a region-based governance system rather than as a sect of violent extremists.

As in the above outlook, in the short-term, what becomes of HTS is of great interest whether the situation stabilizes or the conflict intensifies. The world is watching to see if this organization, an offshoot of violent extremism can transform itself into a regular political actor. Al-Qaeda did not display any signs - not before nor after 9/11 - of forming a state by regarding itself as an agent of self-governance. Rather, al-Qaeda appeared to limit their mission to destroying the existing order.

The IS, which appeared afterwards, specifically declared the caliphate state as their goal. It sought to restore the era of Islamic orthodox caliphs in its original form of the 7th century. This meant it pursued a completely different path from al-Qaeda. IS stated its intention to function as a state and set policy goals. Therefore, its potential for

enlargement and level of impact were greater than that of al-Qaeda. However, in the process of declaring the establishment of the state, IS promoted Takfirism¹⁶⁾ and engaged in extreme violence and terrorism. It soon became clear that IS lacked the basic foundation to be a state, and eventually started to decline without ever becoming a regular political actor.

Unlike the above two cases and despite being an offshoot of al-Qaeda, HTS's ideology is vastly different from that of al-Qaeda. It appears to aspire an Islamic governance system based on traditionalism. HTS is not focused on destruction by strife and conflict, but on building a concrete system of Islamic governance. HTS is founded on relatively moderate ideologies such as the Ghazali school of Islam that adapt Islamic doctrines to social changes and apply it accordingly. This is why many people are waiting to see signs of change. However, anti-terrorism intelligence agencies in Western countries such as the US and Europe have not ruled out the possibility that the actions of HTS are based on a deceptive tactic, and thus continue to monitor its actions.

If the current political turmoil in Idlib persists, Turkey's support of HTS is likely to increase. The possibility of HTS establishing itself in the Idlib area as a unique political entity that has the autonomy of a buffer zone should not be ruled out. Modeling itself after the Kurdish Regional Government of the three provinces of northeastern Iraq, HTS will probably seek self-governance. A stabilization of the situation and HTS leadership are expected to be the two important variables that will shape the future.

This document was written as reference material for the purpose of establishing foreign policies. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Korea National Diplomatic Academy.

16) Takfirism believes that in order to realize the authentic Islam value, all means are justified as long as it achieves the goal. It goes as far as to say nothing in the Quran can be reinterpreted. Since it sees all violent acts to be justifiable, mainstream Islam regards Takfirism as a heretic ideology.