



ROJAVA  
INFORMATION  
CENTER

# WHEN JIHADISM LEARNS TO SMILE: HTS' EVOLUTION AND ITS CURRENT PRESENCE IN NORTH AND NORTH- WESTERN SYRIA

JUNE 2023



# CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>3</b>
	1.1 AUTHORS	
	1.2 METHODS	
<b>2</b>	<b>HAYAT TAHRIR AL-SHAM</b>	<b>4</b>
	2.1 HTS' ORIGINS AND ITS RELATIONSHIPS WITH ISIS AND AL-QAEDA	
	2.2 HTS' FAÇADE: A NEW FORM OF JIHADISM	
	2.3 HTS' REALITY: AN AUTHORITARIAN REGIME	
<b>3</b>	<b>HTS' INFLUENCES IN AFRIN BEFORE OCTOBER 2022</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>HTS CAMPAIGN IN AFRIN IN OCTOBER 2022</b>	<b>13</b>
	4.1 OCT 7 <sup>TH</sup> -11 <sup>TH</sup> . ABU GHANNOUM ASSASSINATION AND EVENTS IN AL-BAB	
	4.2 OCT 11 <sup>TH</sup> . INITIAL THIRD LEGION SURGE, THE INFIGHTING SPREADS	
	4.3 OCT 12 <sup>TH</sup> -13 <sup>TH</sup> . TURNING POINT	
	4.4 OCT 13 <sup>TH</sup> -17 <sup>TH</sup> . KAHR JANNA AND NEGOTIATIONS	
	4.5 AFTERMATH	
<b>5</b>	<b>HTS PRESENCE IN TURKISH-OCCUPIED TERRITORIES TODAY</b>	<b>19</b>
	5.1 MILITARY PRESENCE	
	5.2 AL-HAMRAN CROSSING	
	5.3 OTHER EVIDENCE OF HTS EXPANSION	
<b>6</b>	<b>DISCUSSION</b>	<b>23</b>
	6.1 HTS IS REPLACING THE SNA	
	6.2 RECONCILIATION, TURKISH WITHDRAWAL AND HTS-ASSAD ALLIANCE	
<b>7</b>	<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>APPENDIX</b>	<b>31</b>
	8.1 SNA FACTIONS POCKET ENCYCLOPEDIA	
	8.2 SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	
	8.3 ABBREVIATIONS	

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is a jihadist political and military organization which in recent years has become a key actor within the Syrian Civil War. It is active in northwestern Syria, with the Idlib governorate as its stronghold. In 2022, it started a process of expansion into northern Syria's Turkish-occupied territories. These consist of the three regions which are under the control of the Syrian National Army (SNA): the Afrin region, the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle (between the cities of al-Bab, Azaz, and Jarablus), and the 'M4 Strip' region (between the cities of Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye). Nowadays HTS is active in all three regions, although to different extents. In this report RIC describes the organization, observing how HTS is implementing what appears to be a novel form of jihadism and providing evidence that points to its authoritarian character. RIC also analyses the events that, since the beginning of 2022, have allowed HTS to extend its influence over Afrin region and beyond. In this respect, a detailed record of the timeline of the October 2022 infighting and HTS campaign is included in Section 3. Furthermore, information on the current presence of the militia in the Turkish-occupied territories is gathered. Finally, it is discussed how all the material presented seems to hint, in the long-term, to a possible dissolution of the SNA into the ranks of HTS, how this could affect the region, and what could be the response of the involved foreign powers. In any case, HTS is today a determined and dangerous actor in the already turbulent Turkish-occupied territories. Apart from the personal perspective of the authors, RIC hopes the international community might find this report to be a useful source, thus contributing to a roadmap to peace for every person living in north and northwestern Syria.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 AUTHORS

The Rojava Information Center (RIC) is an independent media organization based in North and East Syria. The RIC is made up of local staff as well as volunteers from many countries across Europe and North America. Some of us have experience in journalism and media activism and came here to share our skills, and others joined bringing other skills and experiences to the team. There is a lack of clear and objective reporting on North and East Syria, and journalists are often unable to make contact with ordinary civilians and people on the ground. We set up the RIC to fill this gap, aiming to provide journalists, researchers, and the general public with accurate, well-sourced,

<sup>1</sup> <https://rb.gy/bvxig> ([www.stj-sy.org](http://www.stj-sy.org))

transparent information. We work in partnership with civil and political institutions, journalists, and media activists across the region to connect them with the people and information they need.

## 1.2 METHODS

The information used to write the present report was collected mainly through open source research. In a few instances, data was insufficient and RIC reached out to on-the-ground sources and local newspapers for further verification and description of the related events.

# 2. HAYAT TAHRIR AL-SHAM

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is a military and political organization belonging to the Sunni Salafi movement. It is authoritarian, and is designated as a foreign terrorist organization by the UN Security Council, the US, Russia, and Turkey. It is widely considered to be jihadist but in a novel 'political' way. This marks it as distinct from al-Qaeda and ISIS. HTS' present day connection to the two Salafi-jihadist groups is debated; an issue that is unpacked in this section. HTS de facto administers an Islamic state in the Idlib region, northwestern Syria, governing its population of 4.5 million via the so-called Syrian Salvation Government.<sup>2</sup> According to the public speeches of its leadership, it aims to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's rule and establish an Islamic State all over Syria. In the last year, it has started to play an increasingly determining role also in northern Syria's Turkish-occupied territories.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.1 HTS' ORIGINS AND ITS RELATIONSHIPS WITH ISIS AND AL-QAEDA

HTS was formed in January 2017. Its origins, however, date back to 2012 when its current leader, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, was sent to Syria by the Islamic State in Iraq's (ISI) leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to organize ISI's Syrian offshoot. There, al-Jawlani managed to set up the jihadist Jabhat al-Nusra militia and started to fight in the Syrian Civil War. From its inception though, al-Nusra exhibited two characteristics that detached it from a canonical Salafi-jihadist guerrilla group: it took an active part in the administration of the rebel areas by providing social services, and it accepted allyship with other insurgent groups, even those not ideologically aligned. The militia's tactics proved

<sup>2</sup> [rb.gy/ghpfc](http://rb.gy/ghpfc) ([www.france24.com](http://www.france24.com))

<sup>3</sup> <https://akmckeeper.substack.com/p/a-tale-of-two-muharrars>

effective and, by November 2012, The Washington Post was describing it as "the most aggressive and successful" among the Syrian rebel forces.<sup>4</sup>

In April 2013 al-Baghdadi, in order to take credit for al-Nusra's expansion, announced the evolution from ISI to ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), expecting al-Nusra to be incorporated within it. On the contrary, al-Jawlani seized the opportunity to shift allegiance to al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Zawahiri's approval cut al-Nusra's connection to ISIS. This was a major event inside the jihadist movement, as shown by the clashes between ISIS and al-Nusra that followed.

In March 2015, al-Nusra and other insurgent groups converged to gain control over Idlib, which by then had become one of the main nuclei of the Syrian rebellion. Still, its affiliation to al-Qaeda was preventing it from properly unifying with its on-the-ground allies. This, allegedly, motivated al-Jawlani's next move: by rebranding al-Nusra as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, he departed from al-Qaeda without first consulting al-Zawahiri. Officially, this was not accepted by the latter and led to some al-Qaeda veterans to leave Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.<sup>5</sup> This does not suffice, however, to rule out the possibility that the two leaderships maintained secret communication. For example, in 2018, the UN Security Council was reporting that contact between the two was still ongoing.<sup>6</sup> Related to this, at the time the organization was also reportedly relying on donations from private citizens from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and Kuwait: the detachment from al-Qaeda thus would have enabled such donors to safely continue their practice.<sup>7</sup>

Then, in January 2017, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham coalesced with Jaysh al-Ahrar, a breakaway from the Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyah (an Islamist and Salafi faction al-Nusra had been allied to), as well as a few other minor factions, to form Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. This led further commanders loyal to al-Qaeda to quit and to restructure themselves within the Hurras al-Din organization (HD) in late 2017. From that point on, HD became the official al-Qaeda representative in Syria.

The events that followed this lent weight to the claim that HTS had truly broken its ties with al-Qaeda. In June 2020, HD formed a new operations room, the so-called 'Fathbutu', that drew more militias from the ranks of HTS and started to undermine HTS hegemony in the region. In response, HTS arrested some of the defecting leaders, which sparked some days of fighting

4 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/al-qaeda-affiliate-playing-larger-role-in-syria-rebellion/2012/11/30/203d06f4-3b2e-11e2-9258-ac7c78d5c680\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/al-qaeda-affiliate-playing-larger-role-in-syria-rebellion/2012/11/30/203d06f4-3b2e-11e2-9258-ac7c78d5c680_blog.html)

5 [rb.gy/wi7we](http://rb.gy/wi7we) ([www.washingtoninstitute.org](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org))

6 [rb.gy/bm74g](http://rb.gy/bm74g) ([documents-dds-ny.un.org](http://documents-dds-ny.un.org))

7 [rb.gy/3tzv0](http://rb.gy/3tzv0) ([dam.gcsp.ch](http://dam.gcsp.ch))

between HTS and the HD-led coalition. The result was the defeat of the latter. HTS actively pursued al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in its territories. On one hand, this hints to a real detachment between the two organizations. On the other hand, one needs to consider HTS' will to remain the sole strong actor in the region. This tactic of dismantling non-aligned factions had already been adopted by HTS and al-Nusra several times in the past, for example in 2014 against the Syrian Revolutionaries Front and between 2017 and 2019 against Ahrar al-Sham and Nour al-Din al-Zinki. Indeed, this strategy appears to be a strength of the organization.

In conclusion, although former ISIS commanders and members have been documented within the present ranks of HTS, the detachment between the two organizations is definitive. However, there remains debate over the nature and strength of the connections that remain between HTS and al-Qaeda. The fact that HTS has fought against factions that were openly affiliated with al-Qaeda might not be enough to rule out a potential present-day covert connection between HTS and al-Qaeda.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.2 HTS' FAÇADE: A NEW FORM OF JIHADISM

Tracing the evolutionary line of the array of armed organizations that eventually coalesced to form HTS allows the organic affiliations to both the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ) to be clearly seen. Ideologically speaking, the differences were minimal: all three belong to the Sunni revivalist movement of Salafism. In practice though, the way in which HTS has been implementing the Salafi school is removed from the notion of jihadism that is commonly used in Western media. While IS, AQ, and also HTS' direct predecessor Jabhat al-Nusra, all count as Salafi-jihadists, HTS is not. Purportedly, it abandoned the transnational character of jihad, diverting to a 'localization' in north-western Syria. Back in 2017, less than one year after its own formation, it established the Syrian Salvation Government in Idlib, through which it has been administering the region to this day. Via this move, it became possible for an organisation born as strictly military, to begin wielding the powerful tool that is politics.

The Doha talks between the Taliban and the US, and the subsequent negotiation of the US' exit from Afghanistan, offer a parallel to this development within HTS.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, this is one of the reasons why the jihadist label is maintained

<sup>8</sup> [rb.gy/hm8b2](https://rb.gy/hm8b2) ([www.washingtoninstitute.org](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org))

<sup>9</sup> [rb.gy/1gxgg](https://rb.gy/1gxgg) ([www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com))



al-Jawlani , July 2016

by Western analysts: since the strategies of ISIS did not prove effective in maintaining an Islamic State, it is conceivable to think that the Taliban and HTS took the lead and evolved. According to Aaron Zelin, Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, HTS' conduct should rather be referred to as "political jihadism" and should be regarded as a novel form of jihadism that may be adopted by other radical Islamist organizations around the world.

Back in May 2020, addressing HTS' fighters, al-Jawlani said, "Some people limit the issue of implementing the rule of the Sharia to just imposing some of the Hudoud<sup>10</sup> punishments, chopping off hands, stoning whomever, whipping someone who drinks alcohol, and so on. But this is a very basic part of the very big concept of implementing the rule of the Sharia."<sup>11</sup> These words exemplify the theoretical detachment from HTS' jihadist predecessors, but at the same time underline that this consists not of a rejection but of an evolution - an evolution that led to the creation of the institution of the Salvation Government and more.



al-Jawlani, April 2021

10 In the Islamic law (Sharia), the hudoud is an extremely severe type of crime punishment. It is supposed to be executed in public, with penalties ranging from whipping to hand amputation or stoning to death. Historically pertaining to pre-modern Islam, it was also then rarely applied, due to the extremely high evidentiary requirements. This excepts modern extremist Islamist groups such as IS and AQ-affiliated ones.

11 rb.gy/hk6jo (www.washingtoninstitute.org)

Al-Jawlani's efforts have thus been directed to the construction of a careful façade, both in foreign and internal politics. He started to appear in interviews in Western media outlets and he even reached out to the US via back channels, stating that HTS does not pose any threat to the West.<sup>12,13</sup>



al-Jawlani, April 2023



al-Jawlani, April 2023

This seems to have had some impact, since international counterterrorism drone strikes in Idlib nowadays do not target HTS members. In turn, this has a very pragmatic advantage for al-Jawlani's internal politics: by permitting him relative freedom to participate in public events, he can today present himself as a benevolent leader close to his people.

On the economic side, pragmatism is again prioritized and under-the-table agreements with state actors are numerous (something unacceptable for the "anti-secularist" Salafi-jihadism). HTS' first and foremost commerce partner is Turkey. This trade generates a stable revenue of millions of dollars per month through the Bab al-Hawa crossing, which connects HTS-held Syria to Turkey. The leadership of the rebel group still claim it will fight until all the cities of Syria are liberated from Assad, but at the same time there has been no appreciable change in the front lines since the Turkish-Russian cease-fire was agreed in May 2020. On the contrary, HTS is also covertly trading with the Assad government.<sup>14</sup> Another notable source of income comes from international humanitarian aid, with one tenth of all of aid disappearing into the coffers of the Salvation Government.<sup>15</sup>

12 [rb.gy/klljq](https://rb.gy/klljq) ([www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org))

13 [rb.gy/y4d0k](https://rb.gy/y4d0k) ([www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com))

14 [rb.gy/09tqy](https://rb.gy/09tqy) ([www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com))

15 [rb.gy/busfq](https://rb.gy/busfq) ([www.syria.tv](http://www.syria.tv))



## 2.3 HTS' REALITY: AN AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

Notwithstanding HTS' rhetoric, signs of a covert authoritarian regime have been leaking from Idlib: arbitrary detention, torture, and summary executions in secret prisons, suppression of dissent, religious discrimination, and gender violence have been defining characteristics of HTS' rule.

While al-Jawlani invites Western observers to visit Idlib detention centers<sup>16</sup> and denies the existence of 'secret prisons', sources on the ground and UN commissions disagree. In the last years, such facilities have been systematically used to detain militiamen who disagree with the HTS leadership and civilians who manifest their dissent towards the Idlib administration. Their existence now can be considered a matter of fact. People are imprisoned without knowing the charges against them, with inadequate access to food and medical care, and without the possibility to access to legal counsel. Even more alarmingly, the UN commission covering the second half of 2022 refers to "multiple, consistent, and credible reports of ongoing executions [...], including women, by firing squad" that have been taking place in such facilities following the sentences of official courts.<sup>17</sup>

In HTS' public speeches, the promise for security and "a dignified life" are often featured prominently. Unfortunately, this is valid exclusively for the Sunni population: both implicitly in the discourse and explicitly in the practice, religious minorities are discriminated against. Alevi and Druze, considered apostate by HTS' ideologues, have been obliged to publicly convert to Sunnism and, together with Christians, have seen their properties confiscated.

Even so, the real situation is also dire for the Sunni population itself. The theocratic Salvation Government lets its ministers and its Shura Council<sup>18</sup> be elected, but from a pre-selected list and by pre-selected voters. Hence, common citizens have no formal means to alter their ruling. Furthermore, no measures to limit HTS' power exist and if popular protests spark up, as was recently the case inside some refugee camps, they are suppressed by force and followed by campaigns of arrests.<sup>19</sup>

As for women's rights, while in the first years a morality police was patrolling Idlib's streets, today the office has shifted to a more 'internationally-cautious' policy: information campaigns which de facto impose misogynous and

16 [rb.gy/0pe6u](http://rb.gy/0pe6u) ([www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org))

17 [rb.gy/q7d5h](http://rb.gy/q7d5h) ([digitallibrary.un.org](http://digitallibrary.un.org))

18 In Islamic countries whose society is organized according to the Sharia, the Shura council is an advisory, consultative or decision-making board whose task is to guarantee a faithful interpretation and application of such law.

19 [www.asianewslb.com/?page=article&id=141773](http://www.asianewslb.com/?page=article&id=141773)

patriarchal customs and limit women's freedoms. These are supported by ad hoc fatwa<sup>20</sup> that silently put pressure on the religiosity of the population. Furthermore, child marriage is a sharp reality. Exacerbated by poverty, lack of education, and a passive judicial body, it is a widespread and accepted practice to which HTS' fighters actively contribute, since many of them are married to minors.<sup>21</sup>

Another ad hoc apparatus, the Electronic Cyber Entity, was created at the beginning of last year in order to monitor the information spreading through the social networks. This led to users being arrested after sharing videos deemed immoral. For example, a young man shared a video in which he was dancing. He was subsequently contacted by HTS, the video was removed, and a photo of him with a shaved head was circulated.<sup>22</sup> Again concerning the right to freedom of expression, journalists, media activists, and the general public who harbour critics of the system are not able to manifest their dissent, since the threat of secret prisons looms large.<sup>23</sup> More than once, the police apparatus of the Salvation Government, i.e. the Public Security Service, forced the shutdown of media outlets and channels, as was the case for Orient TV in 2021. New bureaucratic methods are also instrumentalized here like the press card system, which in a biased manner helps the activity of only certain reporters.<sup>24</sup> It was this approach towards dissent that led to the street assassination of Raed Fares in 2018. Raed Fares was a nonviolent Syrian activist who empowered people by teaching them the tools of journalism. In April 2012, he was one of the minds behind the slogan: "I'm Druze, Alawite, Sunni, Kurdish, Ismaili, Christian, Jewish and Assyrian... I'm the Syrian Revolutionary and proud to be!" (as show in the picture to the right).<sup>25</sup> Allegedly, HTS killed him for these openly pluralistic sentiments. Nowadays though, such overt



A slogan from Fared's group against racism, before HTS crackdown on freedom of expression, April 2012

20 In Sharia, a fatwa is a legal ruling on a point of the law which is given by a qualified Islamic jurist in response to a question posed by a private individual, judge, or government.

21 [rb.gy/3n4u0](http://rb.gy/3n4u0) ([english.enabbaladi.net](http://english.enabbaladi.net))

22 [rb.gy/1jboi](http://rb.gy/1jboi) ([www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com))

23 [rb.gy/cdat7](http://rb.gy/cdat7) ([www.raseef22.net](http://www.raseef22.net))

24 [rb.gy/xdaey](http://rb.gy/xdaey) ([www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com))

25 [rb.gy/qefsl](http://rb.gy/qefsl) ([www.jmepp.hkspublications.org](http://www.jmepp.hkspublications.org))

purges are not seen any more, substituted by the less noisy 'disappearances'. These examples are a few from many instances, in a trend that borders on totalitarianism.

Finally, last month in Jinderes, after the killing of 4 Kurdish citizens at the hands of an SNA faction during the celebration of the Kurdish New Year, some families reached out to HTS to call for help. This reveals how effectively the political jihadist militia has managed to hide its authoritarian nature, spreading the image of a protective and righteous entity even to the surrounding areas. HTS forces were promptly deployed in the town and the three culprits were, just as promptly, disowned by the faction and held accountable for their crime. It remains, however, unclear who will render HTS accountable for its own crimes and assassinations.

### 3. HTS' INFLUENCES IN AFRIN BEFORE OCTOBER 2022

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham started its efforts to spread to the SNA-controlled Afrin region in early 2022, when it held discussions with the leadership of the SNA militia Levant Front to attempt to draw Idlib closer to the Turkish-occupied areas. The HTS' proposal to unify the two militias did not go through, and some analysts described it as ill-posed in and of itself: the two organizations had different ideologies and were active in different geographic areas. Already at that time, this move was widely seen as an effort by HTS to intrude into the Afrin region. In the context of the SNA's inability to engender security in the areas under its control, HTS tried to show itself as an actor capable of providing civilians with relative stability.<sup>26</sup>

In light of the failure of this alliance attempt, HTS turned to other SNA factions. Precisely to those closest to Turkey's agenda, and this proved successful. In March 2022, according to an interview conducted by the independent human rights organization Syrian for Truth and Justice (STJ)<sup>27</sup>, a secret military agreement was made between the SNA's Hamza Division and Sultan Suleiman Shah Division. The pact stipulated mutual defense, support in case of offensive military operations, and unlimited exchange of weapons and fighters. Then, in April 2022, HTS met with the Sultan Murad Division who guaranteed its neutrality in the case that HTS would fight against Levant Front. Under the guidance of MIT (Turkey's state intelligence service), all the alliances that would manifest during the events of October 2022 were already set half a year before.

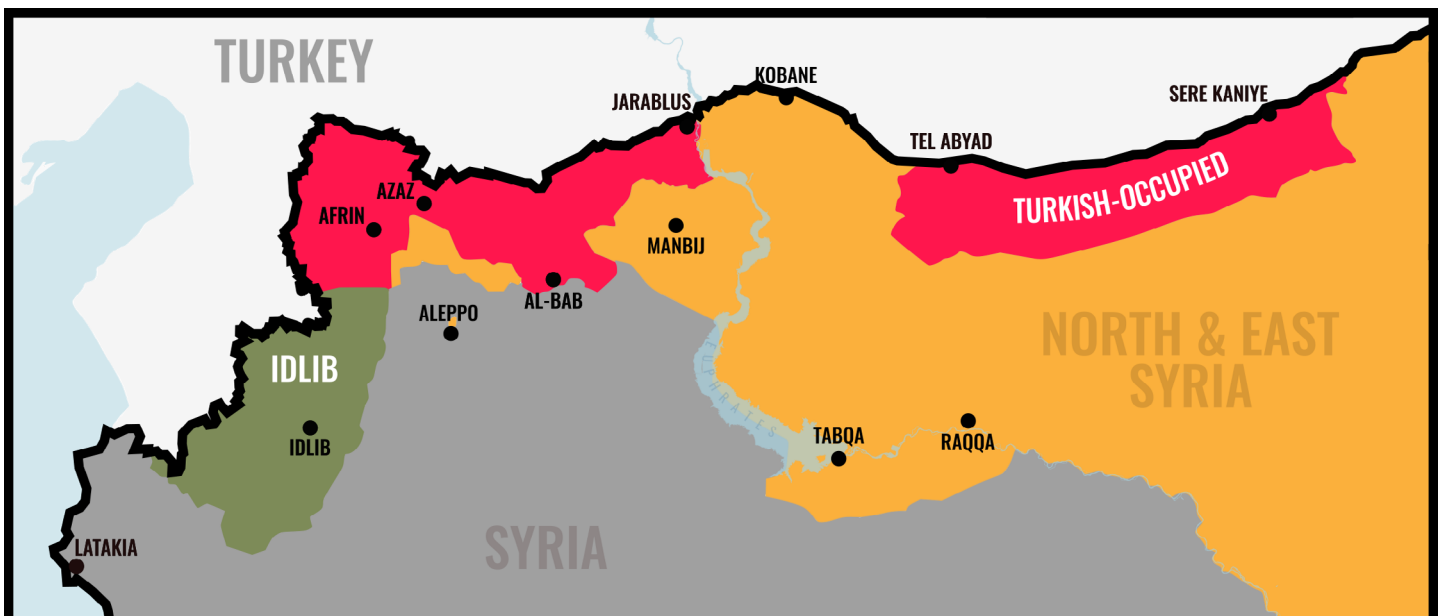
<sup>26</sup> [rb.gy/9ak74](https://rb.gy/9ak74) ([www.rojavainformationcenter.com](http://www.rojavainformationcenter.com))

<sup>27</sup> [rb.gy/zoh7p](https://rb.gy/zoh7p) ([www.stj-sy.org](http://www.stj-sy.org))

After this covert diplomatic phase, preliminary military steps were taken: an HTS battalion and a selected military cell were incorporated into the ranks of Ahrar al-Sham, another SNA faction which was at that time already acting as an HTS proxy, and from there they started to collect intelligence regarding the forces deployed in Afrin region. Concomitantly, they also started to organize the SNA faction in preparation for a future confrontation with the Levant Front.<sup>28</sup>

All this meant HTS was well prepared when, on June 18<sup>th</sup> 2022, the Levant Front attacked the Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector in al-Bab, Jarablus, and Afrin countryside. This occurred following a dispute regarding the affiliation of Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector with the Levant Front-led bloc of SNA factions referred to as Third Legion.<sup>29</sup> On the same night, under the banner of the general Ahar al-Sham, HTS' fighters invaded the southern part of Afrin region under the pretext of providing support to Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector. Faylaq al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sharqiya, the two SNA factions that were supposed to defend Afrin region's borders, withdrew without fighting. In one day, HTS reached the village of Kurzele, 7km south of Afrin city. At the end of the following day, June 19<sup>th</sup>, it was MIT who brokered a cease-fire between HTS and the Levant Front. According to the agreement, both blocs consented to withdraw from their newly seized territories.<sup>30</sup> In practice though, HTS did not hand back a few villages located in the southernmost part of the Afrin district to Faylaq al-Sham. In this way, it secured a strategic bit of land connecting its Idlib statelet to the AANES-governed Shehba region.<sup>31</sup>

**NORTHWESTERN SYRIA POLITICAL MAP, JUNE 2023**



28 [rb.gy/zoh7p](http://rb.gy/zoh7p) ([www.stj-sy.org](http://www.stj-sy.org))

29 [rb.gy/akoq0](http://rb.gy/akoq0) ([www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com))

30 [rb.gy/18d9y](http://rb.gy/18d9y) ([www.baladi-news.com](http://www.baladi-news.com))

31 [rb.gy/daunn](http://rb.gy/daunn) ([www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com))

## 4. HTS CAMPAIGN IN AFRIN IN OCTOBER 2022

This section presents the detailed chronology of the events related to the HTS campaign in Afrin region in October 2022. Specifically, it describes in detail:

- the assassination of the activist known as Abu Ghannoum on Oct 7<sup>th</sup> in al-Bab, and the consequent infighting between Hamza and Levant Front from Oct 11<sup>th</sup>.
- the spread of the infighting to Jinderes region on Oct 11<sup>th</sup>, with the Levant Front militia also involving itself in a feud between two factions both belonging to Hamza militia.
- the expansion of the infighting to the regional level, with Suleiman Shah, Ahrar al-Sham, and, above all, HTS entering the battlefield on the side of Hamza on the night of Oct 11<sup>th</sup>. This climaxed on Oct 13<sup>th</sup>, with the city of Afrin falling into the hands of the HTS-led coalition.
- the siege and fierce fighting around the village of Kafr Jannah, and the final agreement for a cease-fire on Oct 17<sup>th</sup>.

### 4.1 OCT 7<sup>TH</sup>-11<sup>TH</sup>. ABU GHANNOUM ASSASSINATION AND EVENTS IN AL-BAB

Muhammad Abdul Latif, nicknamed Abu Ghannoum, was a prominent activist in the Turkish-occupied, SNA-controlled city of al-Bab. He was involved in the organization of demonstrations and campaigns against rights violations in northern Syria. In particular, he was known for his overt denouncing of crimes, irrespective of who the perpetrators were.<sup>32</sup>

On October 7<sup>th</sup>, he and his pregnant wife were shot dead while traveling on a motorcycle in al-Bab city. The following day, hundreds of people attended the funerals and subsequently took to the streets in what turned out to be a mass demonstration against the SNA's Syrian Interim Government (SIG) administration. The people not only demanded the accountability of the killers, but also that the civil offices and the various military SNA factions leave northern Syria, considering them to be responsible for the ongoing dire security and poor provision of services. Indeed, the killing of Abu Ghannoum was just the latest instance of such violence.<sup>33</sup>

Meanwhile, the Military Police and members of the Third Legion managed to identify and arrest the cell that had executed the homicides.<sup>34</sup> It was composed of three militiamen that turned out to belong to the Hamza Division. Soon, one

32 rb.gy/bguo2 (www.alaraby.co.uk)

33 rb.gy/yp28i (www.syria.tv)

34 rb.gy/pngcr (www.twitter.com)

of them confessed that the mastermind of the assassination was a Hamza commander, Abu Sultan al-Dairi.<sup>35</sup> All the main steps of the investigation were promptly publicized by the Third Legion on social media. On October 10<sup>th</sup>, after the disclosure of Al-Dairi's involvement, Hamza handed him to the al-Bab Military Police. Nonetheless, during the following night, the Levant Front faction of the Third Legion initiated clashes with Hamza. The former managed to take control of Hamza's main headquarters in the city, forcing the latter to withdraw to the neighboring town of Bizaa. During the night, machine guns were used in the streets of the city and, from positions in Bizaa, the Hamza Division shelled some residential neighborhoods of al-Bab. One civilian, Ahmed Muhammad Ali Abu Razouk, lost his life. Others were injured. The following day it was announced that inside the seized al-Mazraa headquarters, the Levant Front had found a secret prison in which a number of civilians kidnapped by Hamza, including some women, were detained.<sup>36</sup>

## 4.2 OCT 11<sup>TH</sup>. INITIAL THIRD LEGION SURGE, THE INFIGHTING SPREADS TO AFRIN REGION

On Oct 11<sup>th</sup>, the infighting spread to Afrin Region. Taking advantage of an ongoing feud between two internal factions of the Hamza Division,<sup>37</sup> the Levant Front headed with one of the factions to the village of Tilifa, Afrin District, with heavy weapons.<sup>38</sup> From there, it continued its military campaign against Hamza Division. Nour al-Din al-Zenki, another SNA faction, also joined in and after only a few hours, 11 villages between Jinderes and the Afrin District were no longer under Hamza's control.<sup>39</sup> Local sources reported that many of the members of the division left their positions without fighting, fleeing to the village of Basouta, which is the main center of Hamza Division in Afrin District, or even defecting from the militia altogether.<sup>40</sup> After this initial surge, others actors joined the scene. By the evening of Oct 11<sup>th</sup> the needle of the scale was already starting to turn upside down: Suleiman Shah, Ahrar al-Sham and, above all, HTS entered the battlefield on the side of Hamza Division. The military convoys of Ahrar al-Sham and HTS arrived directly from Idlib through the Ghazawiya crossing, after it was abandoned for the second time by the Faylaq al-Sham militia, and Suleiman Shah began to attack some of the positions held by the Third Legion in Sheikh al-Hadid from the west.

35 [rb.gy/44sev](http://rb.gy/44sev) ([www.syria.tv](http://www.syria.tv))

36 [rb.gy/vhrm3](http://rb.gy/vhrm3) ([www.afripost.net](http://www.afripost.net))

37 Specifically, the feud took place between the Hamza group of Jaber Al-Batran and the Hamza group of Hazem Marei. The Levant Front sided with the former.

38 [afripost.net/ar/archives/23764](http://afripost.net/ar/archives/23764)

39 [rb.gy/poh49](http://rb.gy/poh49) ([www.syria.tv](http://www.syria.tv))

40 [afripost.net/ar/archives/23774](http://afripost.net/ar/archives/23774)

Aside from HTS, all these actors are factions under the SNA, supposedly the guarantors of security and stability in the region.

Likewise, in the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle, the Levant Front and Jaysh al-Islam attacked and seized some of Hamza's headquarters in Jarablus and in the villages of Ghandoura, Liloh, and around al-Bab.

### **4.3 OCT 12<sup>TH</sup>-13<sup>TH</sup>. TURNING POINT: THE HTS-LED COALITION EXPELS THE THIRD LEGION FROM AFRIN REGION**

Oct 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> were characterized by diffused clashes between the two emergent coalitions. On one side there was the alliance led by HTS, which included Hamza Division, Suleiman Shah, Ahrar al-Sham, and Faylaq al-Sham as active participants, and on the other side the Third Legion led by the Levant Front and including Jaysh al-Islam and al-Mutasim Brigade. Besides this, Sultan Murad indirectly collaborated with the former bloc by allowing its militias to pass through the territories under their control. Analogously, Turkish soldiers withdrew from checkpoints at the southern entrance of the city of Afrin without fighting. As for the other SNA factions present in the region, they maintained a passive position. By the end of Oct 13<sup>th</sup>, Afrin city was captured along with more than 39 villages, the Levant Front and Jaysh al-Islam had withdrawn to the village of Kafr Janna having lost all their basis in the districts of Afrin, Jinderes, Sheikh al-Hadid, and Maabatli, and HTS had set forth its presence in the region.

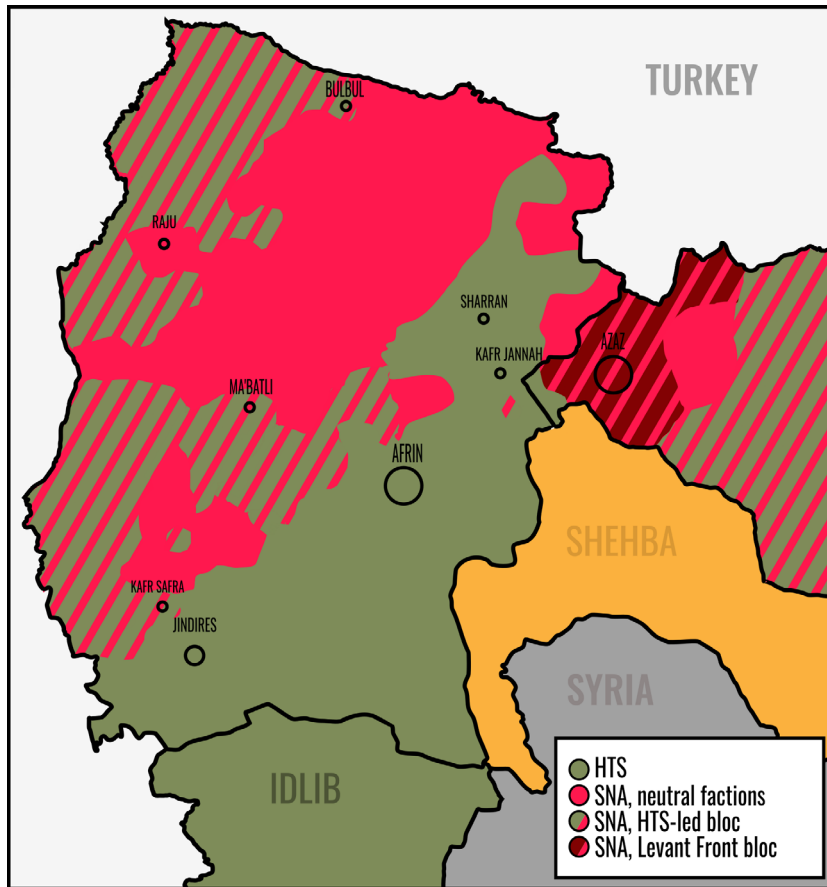
Similarly, in the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle, the tide also turned against the Third Legion. Hamza and Ahar al-Sham Eastern Sector fought it in al-Bab, in the villages to its north-west (Abla, Awlan, Susian, al-Battal, Duwayr Al-Hawa, al-Barouza, and Thathana), in Jarablus, and in the villages to its south-west (including the strategic, much-coveted al-Hamran crossing). HTS this time appeared not to join in on the ground, but kept pressuring Third Legion from the west of Azaz, threatening an invasion into the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle territories too.<sup>41</sup> The factions present in the cities of Marea and Akhtarín (al-Mutasim Brigade and Waqqa), declared their neutrality and threatened an aggressive response if they were attacked.

In both Afrin and al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle, clashes took place irrespective of the surroundings and the possible threats to the citizens. Civilians were injured, including children, and at least 7 lost their lives, including one pregnant woman.<sup>42</sup> Apart from stray bullets and other collateral effects, these casualties

<sup>41</sup> [rb.gy/dr2zh](http://rb.gy/dr2zh) ([www.syria.tv](http://www.syria.tv))

<sup>42</sup> [afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23809](http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23809)

### HTS MAXIMAL EXPANSION IN AFRIN IN OCTOBER 2022



were also actively caused by the SNA factions themselves. Hamza’s militiamen were even reported to be using civilians as human shields. In this context, many locals hid themselves in the basements of their houses, if there was the possibility. Others fled to the countryside and remained there waiting indefinitely, in some instances even overnight. In Jinderes district for example, a wave of displacement occurred in the al-Mahmoudiya and Atma refugee camps. In Afrin district, villagers from Kafr Janna could not go back to their homes for days, waiting for the situation to settle. Reports from on-the-ground sources were grim, with accounts of summary executions of prisoners.<sup>43</sup>

## 4.4 OCT 13<sup>TH</sup>-17<sup>TH</sup>. KAFR JANNA AND NEGOTIATIONS

By the end of Oct 13<sup>th</sup>, the Levant Front only managed to retain control of the strategic village of Kafr Janna, which lies on an elevated point overseeing the road that connects Afrin Valley (200m a.s.l.) to Azaz Plain (600m a.s.l.). The bulk of its forces were already withdrawn from Azaz and al-Bab. Nonetheless, it was not until the evening of Oct 17<sup>th</sup>, after three failed attempts and numerous losses on both sides, that HTS, Ahrar al-Sham, and Suleiman Shah were finally able to seize the village. Soon after, HTS handed it over to the Revolutionaries for Liberation Committee. The latter, one of whose main forces is Sultan Murad, officially presented itself as a peace-keeper, symbolically deploying forces at the former headquarters of the Ministry of Defense of the SIG. This practically put an end to the infighting in Afrin Region.

At this time, negotiations were being held by HTS and Third Legion, the first of which occurred on the night of the 13<sup>th</sup>. At least twice the two parties agreed to cease-fires which subsequently were not respected on the ground.<sup>44</sup>

43 [afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23798](http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23798)

44 [afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23876](http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23876)



HTS' wider aims became more apparent as it stipulated particular conditions within the truce deals.<sup>45</sup> For all of north and northwestern Syria, that is Idlib, Afrin, al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle, and the M4 Strip, HTS demanded:

1. restructuring of the SNA factions, by uniting them under a single command and by not allowing the existence of any organization that does not comply with the military command;
2. removing all militia from civilian settings, by restricting their presence to the fronts and by explicitly not allowing them to operate or interfere with the civil administrations;
3. establishing a single military structure for both the HTS and SNA-controlled territories;
4. granting autonomy to local governing structures, especially with respect to external influences;
5. appointing the Public Security Service of the Salvation Government and a military police force as the sole police bodies;
6. prohibiting of any faction from setting up checkpoints and patrols, restricting this to the jurisdiction of the Salvation Government only.

Significantly, only HTS and Third Legion were present at the negotiating table. None of the other SNA factions took part. Especially remarkable is the absence of Hamza Division, which appeared to play an active role in the whole evolution of the conflict. In contrast, Turkish military officers were there, maintaining Turkish presence and influence constantly while remaining out of the limelight. For example, local media reported that, on the 14<sup>th</sup>, a representative of the government of Turkey joined a round of discussions supporting HTS' position. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, Turkish military troops moved from Kafr Janna to Afrin city, and on the 18<sup>th</sup> armored vehicles of the Turkish army deployed themselves on the Afrin-Azaz road near Kafr Jannah, in order to prevent a possible attempt by Levant Front to retake the village.<sup>46</sup>

## 4.5 AFTERMATH

Since a final deal was never officially announced nor confirmed, this report considers the taking of Kafr Janna, for clarity of exposure, as a watershed moment in the timeline. In order to get a better understanding of the impact of the events of the 11<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> of October, RIC used information gathered from local media sources in the following weeks.

<sup>45</sup> [rb.gy/xsj2a](https://rb.gy/xsj2a) ([www.twitter.com](https://www.twitter.com))

<sup>46</sup> [www.npasyria.com/en/86033/](http://www.npasyria.com/en/86033/)

Initially, HTS announced it would withdraw back to Idlib region once the campaign was over.<sup>47</sup> A military convoy was even seen leaving Afrin city, but local media revealed it to be a cover maneuver: the convoy was indeed composed only of light vehicles, different to what had been used during the campaign, meaning that the bulk of HTS' military forces were still being deployed somewhere inside the region. To conceal its military presence further, hundreds of its militiamen took the banners of Hamza, Suleiman Shah, and Ahrar al-Sham factions, as was the case in Jinderes and Sherawa districts.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, the Islamist authoritarian militia started to implement its control over Afrin city: officers of the Salvation Government moved from Idlib to the city, the Public Security Service took over the judicial and security files, and a new office for receiving complaints against the violations committed by militiamen and settlers was opened.<sup>49</sup> In doing so, HTS presented itself as a new institution, alternative to the SIG and purporting to guarantee security and stability in the region. Two aspects of this process are particularly notable. First, the attempt to gain the approval of the population, for example through the returning of some houses that had been previously seized by Levant Front to their legitimate owners.<sup>50</sup> Second, the evolutionary pressure exerted on the other factions, with the final goal of remaining the sole actor in the region as it had already done in Idlib. HTS started a campaign of arrests all over the Afrin region which resulted in the almost complete removal of the Levant Front, Jaysh al-Islam, Nour al-Din al-Zenki, Samarkand, and al-Waqqas. It also heavily affected the Jaysh al-Sharqiya militia.<sup>51</sup>

Turkey's supervision and intervention was a constant throughout the period. With respect to the SNA factions, Turkey was pushing for a restructuring. The main event on this plane was the Gaziantep meeting, held on November 2<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>52</sup> On that occasion, Turkey asked, among other requests, to unify all the SNA factions into a single army. This would have also entailed shutting all the separate operation rooms, and creating a single financial board who would have controlled all the revenues from the various lucrative crossings in the region.<sup>53</sup> The Turkish demands were basically the same as those of HTS in the first negotiation (see Section 3.4 above). The only difference with HTS' demands was that in the Turkish case, the SNA was expected to build up its own unified institution with administrative, military, and financial organs by itself; while in HTS' case, the SNA was supposed to merge into the already existing HTS-controlled institution, the Salvation Government.

47 [afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23876](https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23876)

48 [afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23971](https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23971)

49 [afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23945](https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23945)

50 [afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23981](https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23981)

51 [afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23989](https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23989)

52 [npasyria.com/en/86693/](https://npasyria.com/en/86693/)

53 [www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/turkey-turns-pressure-allies-syria](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/turkey-turns-pressure-allies-syria)

In the following days an attempt to cope with Turkish demands was made with the reconstitution of the Second Legion.<sup>54</sup> It still included its old members Suleiman Shah, Hamza, and Sultan Murad, and, in addition, Ahrar al-Sham Northern Sector was added, moving from Third Legion. It excluded Jaysh al-Islam, which instead joined Third Legion. Once again, it is unclear to which extent the regrouping on paper will correspond to a unification of the military forces in reality.<sup>55 56</sup> The most critical point is that Turkey took advantage of HTS' campaign, by reportedly threatening the SNA factions that if they would not comply with Turkish requests, Turkey could let HTS take control of the region.<sup>57</sup>

At the same time, Turkey twice gave an ultimatum to HTS, on Oct 21<sup>st</sup> and on Dec 31<sup>st</sup>, demanding that it leave the region.<sup>58</sup> Initially, HTS continued its campaign of arrests in a covert way, again under the banners of Suleiman Shah, Sultan Murad, Ahrar al-Sham, and Hamza, but from the beginning of December, it started to operate less covertly. In particular, the Public Security Service of the Salvation Government modified its campaign of arrests, starting to expel the families of the pursued militiamen from their houses.<sup>59</sup> By the end of the year, it was clear that the presence of HTS in Afrin region was anything but diminishing.<sup>60</sup>

## 5. HTS PRESENCE IN TURKISH-OCCUPIED TERRITORIES TODAY

This section presents some events that occurred since the beginning of 2023 that point towards a steady expansion of HTS in the Turkish-occupied territories.

### 5.1 MILITARY PRESENCE

Notwithstanding the official agreements, at least 350 HTS militiamen remained spread throughout Afrin region following the October events. Local sources report that HTS forces are still stationed in Afrin city, Jindires, Sheikh al-Hadid, and Basouta. Respectively, these places are under the control of Sultan

54 [npasyria.com/en/87209/](https://npasyria.com/en/87209/)

55 [akmckeeper.substack.com/p/tracking-changes-in-the-sna-structure](https://akmckeeper.substack.com/p/tracking-changes-in-the-sna-structure)

56 [afrinpost.net/ar/archives/24383](https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/24383)

57 [www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/turkey-turns-pressure-allies-syria](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/turkey-turns-pressure-allies-syria)

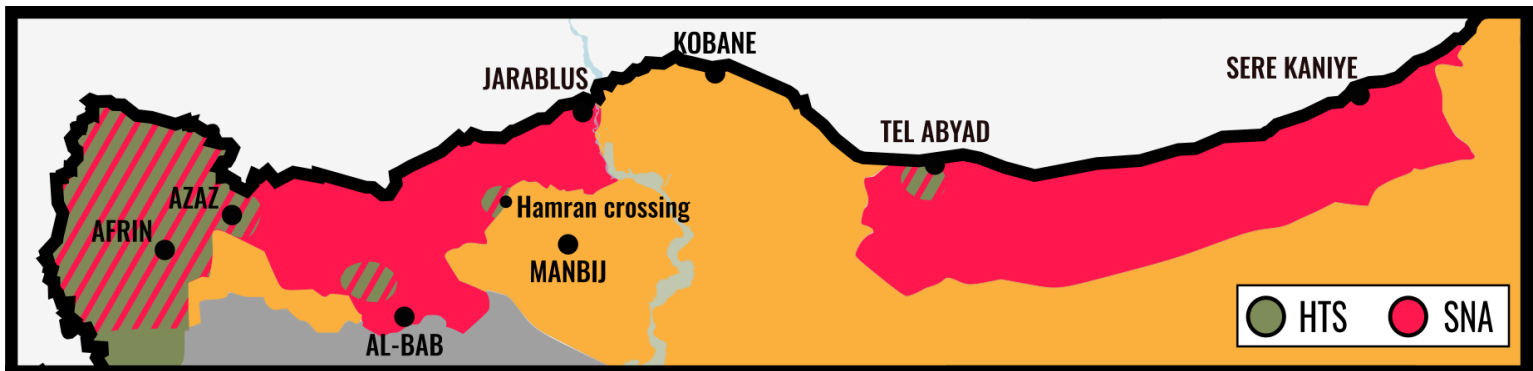
58 [afrinpost.net/ar/archives/25260](https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/25260)

59 [afrinpost.net/ar/archives/25055](https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/25055)

60 [afrinpost.net/ar/archives/25260](https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/25260)

Murad/Hamza/Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Sharqiya, Suleiman Shah and Hamza/Faylaq al-Sham. Apart from Jaysh al-Sharqiya, all these factions belong to the recently re-formed Second Legion. As mentioned above, in Afrin city the Public Security Service (the police arm of the Salvation Government) took responsibility for security there and works closely with Ahrar al-Sham. More generally, HTS fighters are collaborating with the local SNA factions in every place they are deployed.<sup>61</sup> This is especially the case for Ahrar al-Sham, Hamza, and Suleiman Shah. Ahrar al-Sham and Hamza are the factions that, since October, have been lending their banners to allow HTS to remain in the region undercover. As for Suleiman Shah, it allowed HTS to set up a military training base in Sheikh al-Hadid where, hitherto, HTS' leaders have been giving military training and ideological educations to Suleiman Shah's and Hamza's forces. Furthermore, Suleiman Shah received 4 tanks and other military equipment from the Idlib-based group.<sup>62 63</sup> Notably, this is in accordance with what was secretly stipulated between the two back in Spring 2022.<sup>64</sup>

**AREAS OF HTS ACTIVITY IN TURKISH-OCCUPIED TERRITORIES, JUNE 2023**



As for the M4 strip area running from Sere Kaniye to Tel Abyad, less than two weeks after the October campaign in Afrin region, some local media cited the deployment of 60 HTS fighters in the border village of al-Yabisa, 3km west of Tel Abyad. This marked the first time HTS had ever entered the M4 strip. Allegedly, this happened through Turkish facilitation, which allowed HTS' cell to travel through its territories. From there, in March 2023, the HTS fighters moved to seize the Ayn al-Arus village, 3km south of Tel Abyad. In both cases they expelled the Third Legion faction which was present before. Ayn al-Arus village is of strategic relevance because it grants the control of the two main roads from AANES territory to Tel Abyad; namely that from Kobane and that from Manbij. This also suggests a potential expansion of HTS towards

61 npasyria.com/en/94949/

62 rb.gy/zfwyf (www.syria.tv)

63 npasyria.com/en/94949/

64 stj-sy.org/en/hts-scales-up-its-presence-in-afrin-after-the-turkiye-syria-quake/

Tel Abyad in the future. Amidst unclear local reporting of the situation, RIC reached out to civilian sources from the region, who confirmed the news.

As for the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle, RIC is not aware of a direct presence of HTS militiamen anymore. Nonetheless, Ahrar al-Sham and its eastern sector are controlling, respectively, the area north-west to al-Bab and the area south of Ghandoura, around the al-Hamran crossing. Both are acting as HTS proxies inside the SNA (see also Section 5.1).

## 5.2 AL-HAMRAN CROSSING

The previously-mentioned al-Hamran crossing, connecting AANES to Turkish-occupied, SNA-controlled territories, has remained under the control of Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector since October 2022. Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector is an SNA faction active in the Turkish-occupied al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle. It can be considered a proxy of HTS since its decision to part from Third Legion (led by Levant Front) in May 2022.<sup>65</sup> Before October, the crossing was under the control of Levant Front.

Al-Hamran is economically key; indeed, it generates such a high monthly revenue that HTS can use it to entice SNA factions away from Turkey. HTS has a strong hand since some SNA militiamen do not regularly receive their salaries from Turkey; the latest example being the Arab SNA factions in Marea city (al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle), which remained unpaid for more than two months at the beginning of 2023.<sup>66</sup> The crossing has strategical importance too, since today most of Idlib's fuel enters via Turkey. Should the potential Turkish-Syrian reconciliation actually materialize, Turkish policy towards HTS might shift, and al-Hamran would become the main artery for fuel for the Salvation Government.

In the last months, Turkey pressured Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector to return it, without success. It is hard to believe that a faction of such small magnitude as Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector could have maintained such a position against Turkey without the underlying support of HTS. The tug of war then continued and on Jan 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Saddam al-Mousa, the leader of the SNA faction, was assassinated by a drone strike.<sup>67</sup> Even if clear evidence was not provided, Turkey was blamed by the faction and by HTS. This would account for the first case of Turkey targeting members of its own proxy militias.<sup>68</sup>

65 [twitter.com/RojavaIC/status/1582745947188363264](https://twitter.com/RojavaIC/status/1582745947188363264)

66 [afrinpost.net/ar/archives/26935](https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/26935)

67 [rb.gy/1zvfp](https://rb.gy/1zvfp) ([www.syria.tv](http://www.syria.tv))

68 [akmckeeper.substack.com/p/this-week-in-northern-syria-5dc](https://akmckeeper.substack.com/p/this-week-in-northern-syria-5dc)

Subsequently, HTS tried to use the event to trigger a campaign of popular protests in the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle against the Turkish occupation. This was motivated by the fact that Turkey had prohibited any manifestation against the Turkish-Syrian reconciliation, which for the Turkish-occupied regions was tantamount to 'betraying the Syrian revolution'.<sup>69</sup>

On March 7<sup>th</sup>, Turkey reportedly threatened to directly bomb the crossing, so Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector allowed the SIG's Defense Ministry to take it over.<sup>70</sup> The return to the antebellum conditions did not last for long: activated by HTS, the al-Shehba Gathering attacked and retook the crossing on March 9<sup>th</sup>.<sup>71 72</sup> Since then, no major changes have occurred.

### **5.3 OTHER EVIDENCE OF HTS EXPANSION: EARTHQUAKE, NEWROZ KILLINGS, AND AZAZ CITY**

Two additional events – the catastrophic earthquake that hit Syria and Turkey in February<sup>73</sup> and the assassination of four Kurdish citizens during the celebration of the Kurdish New Year ('Newroz') in March – provided HTS with the opportunity to further extend its grip in Afrin region.<sup>74</sup> Both took place in Jinderes town and both were exploited by HTS to present itself to the population as a reliable guarantor of security and stability and, consequently, to build popular support in the region.

Regarding the earthquake, interviews recently published in a report by Syrians For Truth and Justice documented how the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) promptly activated to show that it was able to deliver aid to the affected areas. SSG-affiliated sources fervently recorded and shared these efforts. Unfortunately, this was not accompanied by an equally effective aid delivery by itself, since the SSG was already scarcely coping with the earthquake aftermath in Idlib so had not the practical capability to take care of the situation in Jinderes' on top of this. On the other hand, HTS fighters were soon deployed to pursue the thieves that started to roam around the rubble of the town. Notably also, HTS managed to administer the 25% of the international humanitarian aid that was supposed to be delivered by the SNA. These occurrences indicate HTS' continued activity in the Jinderes area.<sup>75</sup>

69 [rb.gy/ngc83](http://rb.gy/ngc83) ([www.syria.tv](http://www.syria.tv))

70 [rb.gy/n3nq3](http://rb.gy/n3nq3) ([www.syria.tv](http://www.syria.tv))

71 [www.asianewslb.com/?page=article&id=141611](http://www.asianewslb.com/?page=article&id=141611)

72 [afrinpost.net/ar/archives/26863](http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/26863)

73 [twitter.com/RojavalC/status/1623330653570756610](https://twitter.com/RojavalC/status/1623330653570756610)

74 [twitter.com/RojavalC/status/1638910668580720641](https://twitter.com/RojavalC/status/1638910668580720641)

75 [stj-sy.org/en/hts-scales-up-its-presence-in-afrin-after-the-turkiye-syria-quake/](http://stj-sy.org/en/hts-scales-up-its-presence-in-afrin-after-the-turkiye-syria-quake/)

Meanwhile, on Newroz Eve, 4 Kurdish civilians were assassinated by SNA militiamen as they celebrated the holiday. Some members of the family of the victims decided to contact HTS for help. Al-Jawlani himself answered, guaranteed that the criminals would be held accountable, and sent another military convoy. It again crossed into Afrin region without resistance and, in Jinderes, it took control of the headquarters of the Jaysh al-Sharqiya militia, which controls the town and whose militiamen had perpetrated the killings. Nonetheless, the Liberation and Construction Movement, (the SNA internal coalition to which Jaysh al-Sharqiya belongs) managed to present to the protesting population the three murderers before HTS could effectively conduct the investigations. After this, the military convoy returned to Idlib. Even if this time HTS did not manage to benefit maximally from the event, its influence in the region was shown once more by how promptly it got involved in an event that it could potentially have instrumentalized, and by how easily it took the control of the town without facing any resistance from the appointed militia, Jaysh al-Sharqiya. Furthermore, after the events, 155 organizations signed a statement in which they called on the United Nations to take an active role in halting the crimes in the Turkish-occupied territories, to pressure Turkey to act to guarantee citizens' rights in the region, and to counter HTS' worrying expansion.<sup>76</sup>

Finally, there is evidence pointing also at an attempt to take control of the city of Azaz. The city has been under control of the Northern Storm Brigade, an SNA faction affiliated to the Third Legion, since 2012. Recently though another faction, a member of the al-Shehba Gathering (an internal grouping of the SNA which includes the Eastern Sector and which is de facto HTS-controlled), started to spread into the city, clashing with the Northern Storm Brigade. Should al-Shehba Gathering manage to seize all of the city of Azaz, HTS would have an open path to the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle. There, its ally Ahrar al-Sham is already active to the north-west of al-Bab, and Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector are solidified around the al-Hamran crossing.<sup>77</sup>

## 6. DISCUSSION

The following paragraphs discuss some possible developments of the situation in north and northwestern Syria. A first inference consists of the recognition of an already ongoing process that, if left unaltered, might end up with HTS substituting for the SNA as the controlling force in all Turkish-occupied territories. Afterwards, a speculative discussion in the context of the Ankara-Damascus reconciliation will be addressed.

<sup>76</sup> [rb.gy/bz67b](http://rb.gy/bz67b) ([www.stj-sy.org](http://www.stj-sy.org))

<sup>77</sup> [rb.gy/7ss5c](http://rb.gy/7ss5c) ([www.syria.tv](http://www.syria.tv))

## 6.1 HTS IS REPLACING THE SNA

By looking at how the October campaign was preceded in Spring 2022 by secret agreements between HTS and the SNA factions of the Second Legion, namely those better representing Turkish will, it is possible to infer that Turkey not only used HTS to momentarily threaten the SNA in order to achieve its restructuring, as reported by various media,<sup>78</sup> but also actually favors an HTS expansion in the Turkish-occupied territories. From this and from the influence that Turkey holds over the SNA, it is possible that HTS might expand to Afrin region, Azaz, al-Bab, and even Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye. As this report shows, evidence from the ground suggests that such dynamics are already ongoing. To substantiate this claim, it is useful to analyze the totality of the SNA by dividing it in the following way:

- **Those factions that are already under the complete control of HTS and are now acting as its proxy.** This is true for all the sectors of Ahrar al-Sham present in the Turkish-occupied regions and for the members of the recently formed al-Shehba Gathering. As for Ahrar al-Sham, this is the result of the two-year machinations that started with the internal coup back in 2020 and led to the beheading of the militia.<sup>79</sup> As for the al-Shehba Gathering, HTS carefully chanted a siren song that led former members of the Third Legion to detach from it. In particular, the position of Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector is notable. After being enticed into leaving the Third Legion, it found itself involved in the harsh infighting that triggered the October campaign, and in the tension with Turkey itself over the control of the al-Hamran crossing; tension that led to the death of one of its leaders.
- **Those factions that, while still maintaining their autonomy, are collaborating with HTS.** This is particularly the case for the Second Legion. Among others, the Second Legion includes factions that act as criminal organizations aiming to economically benefit from the regions they control. Some, for example Suleiman Shah and Hamza,<sup>80</sup> have even been formed under the direct effort of Turkey. For these factions, devoid of any kind of 'rebellious' ideology rooted in the 2011 uprisings in Syria, it is possible to foresee two scenarios: either they could negotiate, possibly via Turkey's mediation, their incorporation into the HTS structure, maybe in exchange for maintaining the administration of their current turf and of part of the corresponding financial revenue; or their leadership could flee and settle in Turkey, leaving the normal militiamen to dissolve into the ranks of HTS. Such a type of SNA faction is also present outside the Second Legion so other militias might also follow the same path. It is relevant to underline that the Second Legion is acting under the constant steer of Turkey: all of

78 [mei.edu/publications/hts-turkey-and-future-syrias-north](https://mei.edu/publications/hts-turkey-and-future-syrias-north)

79 [rb.gy/cjohe](https://rb.gy/cjohe) ([www.syria.tv](http://www.syria.tv))

80 [npasyria.com/en/94949/](https://npasyria.com/en/94949/)



the secret alliances and non-aggression agreements that allowed HTS to pursue its October campaign in Afrin against the Third Legion involved factions now affiliated to the Second Legion, and it is hard to assume that they did not take place under Turkish supervision.

- **Those factions that are actively rejecting HTS.** The main bloc among them is Third Legion. For almost one year now, pressure has been building up on it. From HTS' side, two main dynamics have been at play. The first consists of engagement in direct military confrontation when the situation was favorable enough. The second has been more covert, with HTS slowly eroding the forces of the adverse bloc by inducing the departure of some of its constituent militias. It is interesting to note that this pressure was also exerted economically and by both HTS and Turkey. With the seizure of al-Ahmran crossing, HTS managed to deprive the Third Legion of a determinant source of income. At the same time, Turkey has been acting in concert, by delaying the already meager salary in a selective way.<sup>81</sup> In fact, since the beginning of the year, only the members of the Third Legion have been suffering from the delay. This exposed the families of these militiamen to hunger and pushed them to defect in favor of the regularly-paid Second Legion next door.<sup>82</sup> In the long run, this may weaken the Third Legion to such an extent that it may lose the military capability to repel a further confrontation.
- **Those factions that until now have maintained a neutral position towards HTS.** They represent the remainder of the equation, since, in contrast with the rest of the SNA so far analyzed, they hold just a minority of the power. They have not been able to effectively coalesce into an organic bloc and now they find themselves isolated. Hence, militarily they are not strong enough to stand alone and once HTS will have expanded enough, they would find themselves forced to either accept its hegemony or dissolve.

Under the assumption that the external influential forces will not qualitatively change their policy towards the region, a gradual expansion of HTS and a concomitant dissolution of the SNA can be expected. Would such a scenario be welcome by Syrian government and the foreign powers involved? As for Turkey, a first advantage would be that on the international level, since HTS is a Syrian organization, northwestern Syria would no longer be labelled as "Turkish-occupied". Furthermore, by maintaining a backchannel relationship with HTS, Ankara may in this way claim it has left Syria, satisfying Assad's long-standing request of Turkish withdrawal from Syrian territory. Therefore, Turkey could at the same time prolong its influence on the region via HTS and sit at the negotiation table for reconciliation, gaining the advantages of a

81 [afripost.net/ar/archives/26935](http://afripost.net/ar/archives/26935)

82 [rb.gy/7nj4h](http://rb.gy/7nj4h) ([www.english.enabbaladi.net](http://www.english.enabbaladi.net))

diplomatic easing with Damascus. A second consequence of HTS expansion would be that north and northwestern Syria would fall under the control of an organization that is internationally classified as terrorist. This would be welcomed by the Syrian government, which has until today always been more than clear about its commitment to strong-arm tactics. From the viewpoint of external relations, Assad's zeroing in on the SNA, which in theory is a coalition of forces protecting a population who rose up for better rights and living conditions, would flow into a much more 'acceptable' counter-terror operation. Also noteworthy is the fact that not only Russia and the US have listed HTS as terrorist, but Turkey itself too. Turkey is formally accusing HTS of terrorism and at the same time already covertly trading with it, supporting it, and helping it to thrive. Besides, Turkey's army is currently heavily deployed all along the northwestern Idlib front line with the Syrian government. Since the Russia-brokered cease-fire in March 2020, Turkey has been securing Idlib and Afrin from Syrian recovery by maintaining a constantly deepening line of military bases. As for Russia's interest to maintain a stable connection to its outpost on the Mediterranean, an opportunely regulated expansion of HTS to the north would not be an obstacle. If HTS proves to be able to secure the trade lines, an aspect that is also key for its survival and that is already ongoing, Russia might even give a green light, steering the Syrian government to accept this resolution. The political approach to jihadism is turning out to be useful for the existence of HTS.

## **6.2 RECONCILIATION, TURKISH WITHDRAWAL AND HTS-ASSAD ALLIANCE**

The comments hitherto have concerned a relatively smooth development of events that are already in motion, under the hypothesis of a continuation of the status quo at the international level. However, there are certain external factors that might alter this.

Turkey appears to be the most determinant, but also the most variable, actor at the moment. With the dire economical situation, it might happen that Turkish policy towards the region changes. Turkey is now involved in north and northwestern Syria in two main ways: through economical and military support of the rebel militias – to both HTS and the SNA, even if in different ways and to different extents – and through its direct military presence; that is, maintaining its troops deployed in the military bases disseminated along the front line with the Syrian government, and inside the Afrin region and the M4 Strip. Turkish intervention has indeed been the fundamental reason why northwestern Syria has been able to survive the Russian involvement in the civil war that gave new life to Assad's rule.

In the coming year, there is the possibility that the Turkish government may decide, or be forced by internal conditions, to decrease its involvement in Syria. This could take a variety of forms, but would certainly reshape the SNA and even push it to dissolution. Still, this does not necessarily imply that Turkey will leave its clout over the region. It might indeed change partner and continue its activity differently. Regarding Turkey's war against the AANES project, the unified and working command of HTS would be an upgrade for Turkey from the current unmanageable jumble of SNA factions.

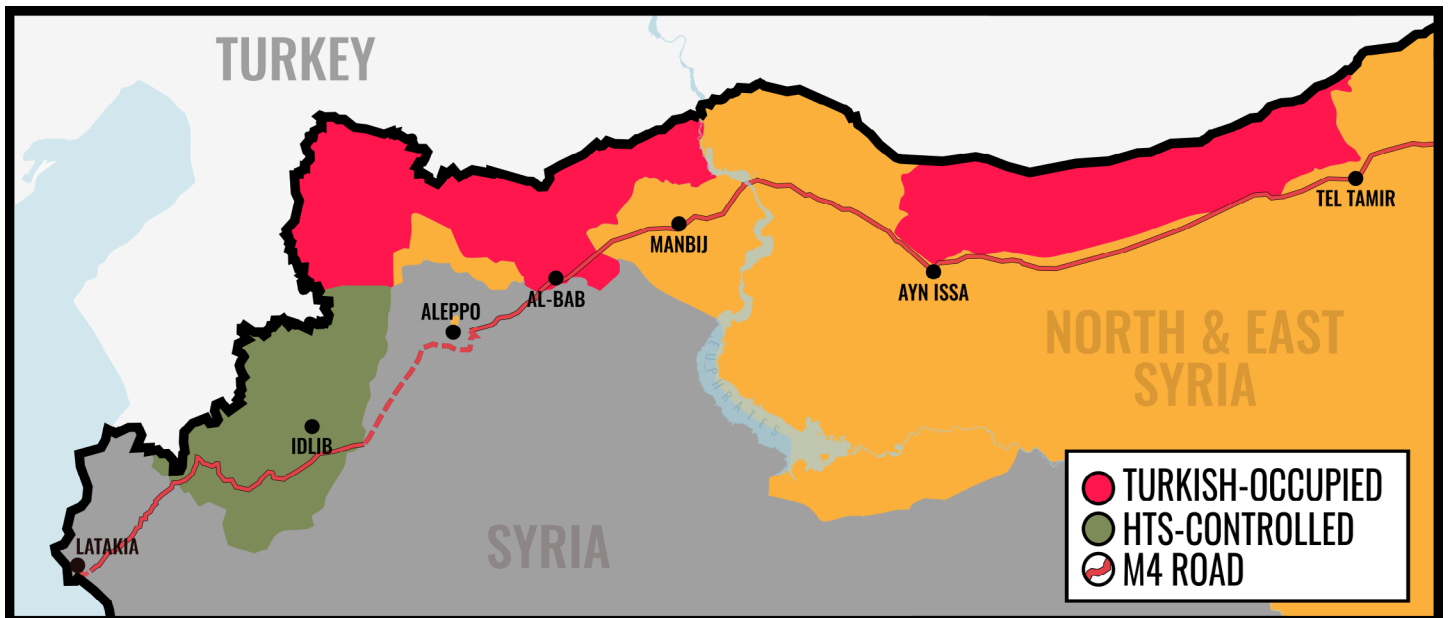
The possibility of handing back the Turkish-occupied territories to the AANES is not under consideration by Turkey, yet this remains the hope of the half a million of people who were displaced during Turkey's 2018 invasion of Afrin and the Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad offensives in 2019. AANES has proven to be the star actor in Syria in terms of being able to engender relative stability and security for an ethnically and linguistically plural population. Indeed, the Arab-majority region around Azaz, al-Bab, and Jarablus – taken by Turkey during the 2016 Euphrates Shield operation – could reasonably find a way to fit inside the structurally multi-ethnic system of NES, the so-called democratic confederalism. From the standpoint of the international community, this should be at least an alternative to a further expansion of HTS that deserves more investigation.

Turkey's future internal political and economical situations may play a determinant role in Turkey's involvement in northwestern Syria. HTS appreciates this and knows it cannot rely forever on Turkish support for survival. This is one of the two reasons – the other being merely a tactically existential one against the Syrian government threat – why HTS has been trying to expand in a way that feeds its autonomy and, especially, its independence from Turkey. This can be noted in the ongoing HTS-Turkey dispute over the al-Hamran crossing: it reveals a strategic will of HTS to tie itself economically also to the AANES. The economical push for HTS was also behind the Afrin campaign and might hint to a future attempt to also control other cities which are crucial in this respect, such as the above-mentioned Tel Abyad or Manbij. Should HTS take Manbij from the AANES, this would be another blow to the embargoed AANES; an eventuality that the current Turkish government would welcome. Along the line of building different economical ties, it is also noteworthy that HTS and the Syrian government itself are already trading: back in 2020, 95% of Idlib's imports were from Turkey, while only 10% of its exports were leaving Syria.<sup>83</sup> Finally, another potential partner to whom in the long-term HTS might turn is the Salafi Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia indeed has been recently pushing for Syrian renormalization and, in so doing, it

83 rb.gy/dtmwc ([www.al-monitor.com/](http://www.al-monitor.com/))

also might end up profiting from the Syrian tangle. In this regard, it is also noteworthy to briefly mention the recent developments on the Iranian side: the China-brokered Iran-Saudi Arabia agreement in April<sup>84</sup> and the Iran-Syria joint statement during the visit of the Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2023. The latter welcomed Syrian normalization with the Arab countries. Notwithstanding the ideological differences, in terms of the Sunni and Shia lines between Saudi Arabia and Iran, or the intra-Sunni Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi schools between Turkey and HTS, diplomatic and economical ties seem to be under construction.

### NORTHWESTERN SYRIA, M4 ROAD



As for the Turkish army, it seems probable that, if anything happens, this will consist of a decrease in the number of deployed troops. Still, it is not easy to foresee how this could actually take place. The conundrum arises from the risk of triggering a refugee wave: the small Idlib region contains at the moment around 4.5 million people, roughly half of which are internally displaced by the war. Should Turkey retreat now, the Syrian government would retake these territories, and thousands of refugees would move into Turkey. This is an eventuality that Turkey and Europe would try to avoid with all means. The withdrawal would therefore likely be a gradual and internationally regulated process. One potential scenario is a settlement permitting the Salvation Government to exist inside the Syrian Nation, thus stabilizing the relation between HTS and Syrian government and allowing the frozen conflict to flow into an economical and military alliance. The bid for Assad would be the

84 rb.gy/x6hqz (www.al-monitor.com)

Turkish-occupied territories and the regions around Tel Rifaat, Kobane, and Manbij. In a joint operation, HTS and the Syrian Arab Army might take these territories from the AANES/SDF and then carve them up. The economical gain would be relevant for both parties. Russia might also be willing to play as a guarantor for the Syrian government not invading Idlib, since the settlement of the conflict in favor of reciprocal economical growth might also lead to the security needed by Russia for its trading to Latakia. In this context, there is also the possibility that HTS would hand the southernmost part of the Idlib region to the regime, that is the Mount Zawiya region. This area is separated by the rest of Idlib region by the last bit of the M4 road. In the region different factions have been active, some of which have also been clashing with HTS. To cede the region in exchange for Afrin and part of the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle might be a win-win for HTS, the Syrian Government, and Russia.

Finally, those people who are now living in Azaz, al-Bab, and Jarablus, categorically refusing the prospect of reconciliation, and who would flee rather than again fall under Assad rule, would move either to AANES territory or to the HTS-administered region. This could alleviate Turkey's concerns about Syrian refugees heading to Turkey. HTS' façade of 'protector of the oppressed people' would again come crucially into play. HTS' presentation of itself as a revolutionary organization, a narrative which was not present in its first years, is also turning to be strategically relevant. Iran may also accept such a plan, since this would imply at least to decrease the influence of Turkey in the region, meaning one fewer strong Sunni actor on the chessboard. Once more, the losers would be the ones who are working along more democratic lines and are still not granted a voice in the quadripartite meetings: the AANES and, ultimately, the Syrian people.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The facts gathered in this report point to an increasing HTS presence in the Turkish-occupied regions at the expense of the SNA. This is happening under Turkish approval, notwithstanding the official Turkish designation of HTS as terrorist group, and might lead to a complete substitution of the SNA with HTS. Nonetheless, HTS is an actor by itself, with its own agenda that only partly overlaps with the Turkish one. On the ground, this has led to a strong alliance between the two actors at times, but also to situations of tension, as was the case for the Hamran crossing. A fundamental characteristic that this report highlights is the rebranding of the jihadist nature of HTS: they dropped many

of the features of a classical jihadist group, to the point that a discussion is today ongoing between scholars on whether HTS should either no longer be labelled as jihadist or should be considered as an exponent of a new form of jihadism, that some may call 'political jihadism'. Apart from the nomenclature, this report shows how HTS is successfully building its façade of respectability, righteousness, and reliability for administering a population. Adding to this, HTS pushes the narrative of being the last standing exponent of the Syrian Revolution. In turn, this might put HTS under the limelight as a potential solution provider in the context of the Ankara-Damascus reconciliation. A more political line is bringing to HTS an enormous existential advantage, both with respect to the classical jihadist groups and for itself as immersed in the equilibrium of not-only national forces at play in Syria. This might also lead international media and policy makers down a path that might turn out to be even more detrimental for the people living in north and northwestern Syria. However, what is truly paramount is substantial, independent, on-the-ground assessments of the situation, and human rights investigations. This is in the context of the publication of various alarming reports on violations of human rights that fly contrary to HTS' Idlib narrative, such as references to arbitrary arrests, torture and summary executions in secret prisons, lack of press freedom via both bureaucratic and violent means, lack of freedom of expression, and ethnic and religious discrimination. These seem to hint to the ongoing construction of an increasingly totalitarian regime. The Turkish operations of 2016, 2018, and 2019 led to the occupation of Afrin, Jinderes, Azaz, al-Bab, Jarablus, Tel Abyad, and Sere Kaniye, to the displacement of more than half a million of people, and to a reality of everyday violations of human rights in the occupied areas. Policy makers should be wary of an HTS expansion to the north into Afrin region and even other Turkish-occupied territories packaged as a reasonable step to improve the situation for the people of the region. An HTS entrance into Afrin would not ameliorate the situation of occupied Afrin and the M4 Strip.

On a final note, it is important to mention that the international community has up until now denied formally recognizing the legitimacy of the AANES, which obstructs the latter's ability to act as a decisive and frontrunning actor pushing for peace in Syria. AANES' proposed democratic and multi-ethnic polity has in many ways proven its worth as a solution for Syria in its northern and eastern territories. A future in which the AANES continues to be politically side-lined is unlikely to bring about real and lasting security and stability for the Syrian people.

## 8. APPENDIX

### 8.1 SNA FACTIONS POCKET ENCYCLOPEDIA

We can identify four blocs inside the SNA at the moment:

- **Third Legion.** Its strongest components are the Levant Front (aka al-Jabha al-Shamiya, الجبهة الشامية) and the Army of Islam (aka Jaysh al-Islam, جيش الإسلام). They are all Islamist, including many Salafi-jihadist groups, and they aim to create an Islamic State in the whole of Syria. They are the most organic bloc in the SNA. Before October 2022, they were one of the main forces in all three Turkish-occupied regions. At times, they had enough power and unity to try to pursue their own line even if not in accordance with Turkey.
- **Second Legion.** Its strongest components are Sultan Murad Division, Sultan Suleiman Shah (aka al-Amshat), and Hamza Division. These factions are the closest to Turkey: they are the most supported by it and, concomitantly, they strictly adhere to the Turkish agenda for the region, via a constant communication with Turkish intelligence. Between July 2022 and November 2022, Suleiman Shah and Hamza momentarily left the bloc and the remaining factions, led by Sultan Murad, rebranded themselves as 'Revolutionaries for Liberation Committee' (Hayat Thairoun Liltahreer, حياة ثائرون للتحرير). The northern sector of Faylaq al-Sham is also belonging to this bloc.<sup>85</sup>
- **Liberation and Construction Movement** (aka Harakat al-Tahrir wa al-Bina, حركة التحرير والبناء). Its strongest components are Ahrar al-Sharqiya (أحرار الشرقية) and Jaysh al-Sharqiya (aka al-Sharqiya, جيش الشرقية). Ideologically, they are both Salafi-jihadists and include in their ranks several former ISIS members.
- **HTS' proxies inside the SNA.** Today, it includes all Ahrar al-Sham factions active in Turkish-occupied territory and the members of the al-Shehba Gathering, that is Nour al-Din al-Zenki, Ahrar al-Sham - Eastern Sector, Ahrar al-Tawhid, and Liwa Suqour Azaz. These are factions that are by now completely under the control of HTS leadership.<sup>86</sup>

Apart from these, some more factions, officially belonging to the First Legion, are also active in the Turkish-occupied region, but these do not act organically. They control isolated villages and today have a minor influence on the region, as testified by their absence in the events described in this report.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Al-Mutasim is against reconciliation [afripnet.net/ar/archives/27688](http://afripnet.net/ar/archives/27688)

<sup>86</sup> [npasyria.com/en/97257/](http://npasyria.com/en/97257/)

<sup>87</sup> [akmckeeper.substack.com/p/tracking-changes-in-the-sna-structure](http://akmckeeper.substack.com/p/tracking-changes-in-the-sna-structure)

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## 8.3 ABBREVIATIONS

**AANES:** Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

**al-Nusra:** Jabhat al-Nusra

**HTS:** Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

**ISI:** Islamic State of Iraq

**ISIS:** Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

**NES:** North and East Syria

**RIC:** Rojava Information Center

**SIG:** Syrian Interim Government

**SNA:** Syrian National Army

**SSG:** Syrian Salvation Government

**STJ:** Syrians for Truth and Justice

**US:** United States of America



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**WWW.ROJAVAINFORMATIONCENTER.COM  
PRESS@ROJAVAINFORMATIONCENTER.ORG  
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