

Al Qaeda Infighting in Syria Tests Loyalty of Foreign Fighters

Featuring Isabel Ivanescu

AUGUST 3, 2020

Al Qaeda-linked groups Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Hurras al Din clashed in late June and early July and remain at odds as defections prompted by the former's increasingly pro-Turkish posture continue. Al Qaeda is backing fighters from a diverse set of groups and HTS has likely secured Turkish support, making the persistence of a Salafi-jihadist haven in Syria very likely. In this episode of Overwatch, Nicholas Heras and Isabel Ivanescu discuss the causes and implications of the recent infighting.

Kim Kagan:

This is Overwatch, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War.

Nick Heras:

Hello everyone and welcome to the latest edition of ISW's Overwatch podcast series. I'm Nick Harris, ISW's Middle East Security Program manager. I'm joined today by Isabel Ivanescu, who is a Research Assistant working on our Syria desk here at ISW. Isabel is also a resident to Al-Qaeda in Syria watcher, and she's been tracking the latest developments in Syria's Northwest greater Idlib region. Isabel, welcome to the show.

Isabel Ivanescu:

Thank you, Nick. It's great to be here.

Nick:

Greater Idlib features an ecosystem of Al-Qaeda linked groups that are building a permanent haven to plan attacks against the West. Isabel has been observing the Al-Qaeda ecosystem and Syria closely and will guide us through it to understand why Al-Qaeda in Syria continues to present a persistent challenge to the United States and its partners. Now, these Al-Qaeda linked groups, most prominent among them, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, aka HTS, Hurras ad-Din, aka HAD, have been involved in some nasty internecine fighting against each other. From the 23rd of June to the 26th of June, HTS and HAD were involved in significant kinetic activity against one another. HAD seized several towns from HTS. HTS storms the headquarters of two HAD allies and HTS also likely assassinated two HAD commanders.

There was significant fighting the village called Arab Saeed in just West of Idlib city which is a major provincial Capitol. Despite in ultimately resulted in casualties on both sides, though the final casualty counts were low with approximately 12 HAD fighters and seven HTS fighters killed. On the 25th of June, Al-Qaeda Central issued a statement condemning the infighting. And on the 26th of June, civilians in Idlib protested the violence between these Al-Qaeda linked groups. Following the protests and the issue of Al-Qaeda Central's statement condemning the infighting, on the 26th of June, HTS and HAD signed a ceasefire which allowed a third Al-Qaeda linked group, the Turkistan Islamic Party, to adjudicate their disputes. Nonetheless, violence between HTS and HAD, although it's sporadic, continued for over a week after the fighting and the situation remains tense. Isabel, what exactly happened in greater Idlib? And why are these Al-Qaeda linked groups fighting each other?

Isabel:

Well, Nick, the events you described were prompted by several deep causes among which is the fact that HTS has increasingly shifted to a pro-Turkish position when operating within the greater Idlib space. This was not previously true and has caused significant disputes, both with other Al-Qaeda linked groups in the greater Idlib space and with members of HTS itself. One of the primary reasons that this infighting happened was that HTS has been experiencing significant defections recently. In the past two years after HTS publicly broke from Al-Qaeda

Central and subsequently has become increasingly pro-Turkish in its behavior, many Al-Qaeda hardliners who had previously been members of HTS have begun to defect to other organizations in the area, primarily Hurras ad-Din. This most recent round of clashes began when HTS arrested a leader within its own organization, al-Tali, who had defected to an operations room called the Stand Firm operations room, or Be Steadfast operations room, led by HAD and undertaken a significant number of fighters with him.

A key observation here is that analysts often tend to think or write at the organizational level, which makes it hard to understand incidents like this one, which are driven not by the organizations themselves, but instead by the behavior and preferences of the individuals within those organizations. HTS is currently trying to tread carefully, simultaneously winning the favor of Turkey without alienating AQ hardliners and causing further defections and simultaneously trying to crack down on defections and therein, deter further defections. And on the other hand, not responding so harshly that they produce even more defections by forcing fighters to participate in infighting. HDS's fighters are dissatisfied with infighting on average, and typically prefer not to engage in behavior that is harmful to other AQ-aligned groups within the Idlib space.

The rank in file of both HTS and Hurras ad-Din are essentially similar in the sense that many fighters have traversed the Idlib space from one group to another and thus, many know each other interpersonally. They tend to have the same kind of ideological agenda and a number of fighters who had interviewed have, from both sides, articulated that their issue with the other group is not the members who they see as being just like them but instead the leadership.

You mentioned the intense fighting between HTS and HAD in the town of in Arab Saeed. In that town, fighters from both sides issued informal unsanctioned statements claiming that they did not want to be fighting each other. Al-Qaeda aligned groups have always struggled with using violence against other Salafi-Jihadist groups. And indeed the rise of ISIS in 2013 and 2014 was a turning point for Al-Qaeda, in that Al-Qaeda aligned groups had to make the explicit decision of fighting others with similar but evidently not identical ideological positions. This hesitation remains common among many of the fighters in this space and as a result, HTS finds itself in this very difficult position. Which ultimately explains both, why the infighting occurred and why the violence that comprised the infighting was comparatively so limited.

Nick:

Isabel, that's very interesting. So you're telling us that HTS has decided that it's best to throw its lot in with Turkey rather than with the Al-Qaeda organization?

Isabel:

I wouldn't go so far as to say that HTS has turned its back on Al-Qaeda or fully aligned with Turkey, but simply that HTS is behaving in an increasingly pro-Turkish manner in order to achieve its short-term ambitions. Currently, HTS dominates most of greater Idlib province and is fearful of a pro-regime offensive, which will begin to chip away at that territory. Turkey is useful to HTS in two ways. First, it has significant force presence within greater Idlib that it could use to oppose a pro-regime offensive when and if one does come. And second, Turkey signed a ceasefire with Russia, the main backer of the Assad regime, on March 5th and is intent on upholding that ceasefire. And in that sense, the Turkish and HTS's interests in this situation align.

As a result, HTS has taken a number of actions that are favorable to the Turkish government, such as protecting the ceasefire by cracking down on Hurras ad-Din which might've hoped to spoil the ceasefire, conducting a series of raids on ISIS cells that were believed to be plotting attacks on Russo-Turkish and joint patrols that were implemented as part of that ceasefire agreement and clearing Hurras ad-Din out of the Sahal Al-Ghab plane, a region

in which Russia had been contemplating launching a military offensive and where Russia has used the guides of extremist presence as a pretense to take military action.

Now this pro-Turkish behavior on the part of HTS is likely only a short-term strategy. Ultimately, HTS's leader Julani, is still intent on establishing an Islamist microstate in greater Idlib and then expanding the jihad out of Syria. However, his strategy is explicitly Syria first and Idlib first in the sense that he is willing to set aside any transnational ambitions temporarily while building up this safe haven in Idlib. This pro-Turkish behavior would likely not be occurring if Julani could simply choose on the basis of ideological alignment. But right now, he needs Turkish cooperation in order to protect his territorial control of greater Idlib. This, however, has alienated members within the HTS organization who have a different view and who do not want to put Syria first in terms of HTS's strategy and instead want immediately to turn to these transnational ambitions.

Nick:

Well thank you, Isabel. Okay. So HTS has been pushing to become more Syrian and therefore better accepted by the local population. That's probably pretty leery about hosting an Al-Qaeda faction. So what does HTS's drive to become a Syrian organization mean for its relationship with a network of foreign fighters in Idlib that are in Syria to wage jihad under Al-Qaeda's banner?

Isabel:

Nick, that characterization is exactly right. HTS is determined to win over the local population, which is evidently Syrian. And the presence of foreign fighters can often alienate locals because these fighters do not speak Arabic, do not resemble the local population, and that tends to cause tensions. Indeed, Hurras ad-Din and TIP have experienced that this is a major limiting factor in terms of their community outreach and HTS is wary of experiencing a similar kind of dynamic. This dynamic is a major reason why Al-Qaeda Central usually tries to funnel foreign fighters to countries where they most resemble the local population in terms of both physical appearance and language spoken. HTS, thus, has actually proactively tried to push certain foreign fighters out of its organization and into other organizations in the Idlib space.

However, HTS in so doing, has also alienated foreign fighters for a variety of different reasons. First, the fact that HTS is rebranding as essentially Syrian or Syrian at its core, has made certain foreign fighters feel that they are undervalued by HTS and that their contribution to the jihad is not being recognized. This has pushed them into the arms of other groups within the Idlib space, like Hurras ad-Din. Furthermore, foreign fighters are on average more extreme in their beliefs than local fighters. Many local fighters joined HTS because of its superior resourcing after having previously belonged to secular or moderate opposition groups that were not gaining traction against the Assad regime.

Essentially HTS or then JN, Jabhat al-Nusra prior to its rebranding, was the most powerful group operating in this space and so it attracted fighters with a variety of ideological beliefs who are simply convinced that the Assad regime had to fall and wanted to fight the Assad regime as effectively as possible. This is not an accurate characterization of the foreign fighters in the Idlib space. Instead, the foreign fighters are often AQ diehards who had fought in a number of different conflicts before, including in Afghanistan, in Chechnya, in Iraq, in Libya, and then had come to Syria because Al-Qaeda had put out a call for mujahideen to go to Syria and fight the Assad regime and fight to establish an Emirate.

Not to mention, foreign fighters are facing very different incentive structure than local fighters. Foreign fighters are sacrificing something significant and leaving their home countries, which are usually more stable and where they typically have more opportunity to join one of these groups in Syria. Whereas a local often has very little

opportunity to do anything else or to otherwise advance in this war-torn region and who might opt to join these groups because in so doing, they do not expose themselves to significantly more risk or incur significant opportunity cost. Not to mention, it is often very difficult for foreign fighters to enter Syria unless they have the assistance of an AQ or ISIS facilitation network, which means that Al-Qaeda and ISIS are essentially able to screen the foreign fighters that they are bringing into the country.

Because foreign fighters are on average so much more ideologically extreme, they tend to take issue with Julani's strategy of Syria first. The pure Al-Qaeda strain does not believe that Syria should be prioritized over the other areas in which they believe their organization has interests. Instead, these more extreme fighters, or hard liners, believe that Julani and his organization should be prioritizing carrying out attacks on Israel or in the West. In so far as Julani has very explicitly indicated an interest in prioritizing Syria before expanding to any kind of transnational ambitions, he has significantly alienated these foreign fighters.

Finally, Julani's cooperation with the Turkish security forces, which many of these foreign fighter diehards view as essentially a secular invading force, has created further issues for his organization. In some ways, HTS is happy to be rid of some of these foreign fighters because it means that it is not alienating the local population to the same extent. On the other hand, though, foreign fighters are often more seasoned and capable because of their participation in other conflicts and their commitment to the cause. And in that sense, this is a significant loss for HTS.

Nick:

Isabel, that's a fascinating rundown of how HTS has to manage its community cover, if you will, in Northwest Syria by building deep roots into the local Syrian population, but also needs to be able to leverage the skills and experiences of foreign fighters that have come to Syria to fight jihad under the banner of Al-Qaeda. So let's dive a little bit more into this. What are the long-term consequences of HTS's tug of war with HAD for the hearts and minds of foreign fighters who came to wage jihad in the name of Al-Qaeda.

Isabel:

Thanks, Nick. So there are a few consequences, but one of the most immediate is a simple loss of fighters. Hurras ad-Din is currently composed of about 50% foreign fighters and 50% local fighters. We don't have equally precise numbers on the Turkistan Islamic Party, or TIP, but we know that the percentage of foreign fighters in that organization is somewhere north of 70 or 80%. The percentage within HTS is much smaller and has been consistently declining in the past few years. This means HTS is losing fighters, and it is also losing able and capable and experienced fighters, which may present battlefield problems for HTS at a later time.

Furthermore, HTS is also losing out on certain kinds of networks that exist within the Idlib space. Affinity bonds created by shared national or ethnic identity can make groups more unitary. For example, we believe that this was one of the primary reasons that the Turkistan Islamic Party has not fractured despite having a number of different ideological streams within it. These fighters often know one another, particularly when they are foreign fighters and share a national or ethnic identity. We're not talking about that many fighters total. The total membership of Al-Qaeda aligned groups in the Idlib space, including HTS, is likely somewhere between 20 and 30,000 fighters. And those kinds of interpersonal relationships can actually be very important in allowing HTS and other groups to negotiate with one another or interact and foster positive interactions or otherwise quell infighting.

Nick:

Isabel, that's a fascinating journey through the Al-Qaeda ecosystem in greater Idlib. So I'm going to ask you, with all the stand in the way it is right now, does Al-Qaeda seem to lose a lot in Syria because of this infighting?

Isabel:

Nick, I think the answer to that question depends on how genuinely pro-Turkish or anti Al-Qaeda HTS will become. My current assessment is that HTS is turning to Turkey in a moment of need, that the Turkish-HTS Alliance is born of convenience and not real commitment. And so far as this is true, Al-Qaeda likely does not stand to lose, but instead stands to benefit because HTS, which likely still maintains links to Al-Qaeda Central but in any case has a number of Al-Qaeda aligned members, will be able to further secure its Idlib stronghold through cooperation with Turkey and then attempt to govern that space and otherwise use that space as a safe haven. HTS is having issues with other Al-Qaeda linked groups in Idlib. Not because Julani truly disagrees with their ambitions, but instead because Julani feels that they must prioritize Idlib and the other groups are jeopardizing this as previously mentioned by endangering the Russo-Turkish ceasefire, alienating Turkey, or even potentially provoking a US or Western response by trying to plan external attacks.

However, HTS has not exhibited the intent to actually squash these AQ loyalists in the Idlib space but instead has simply tried to message that it is the dominant force and that these groups must get in line with Julani's vision. Hurras ad-Din and the other somewhat more hardlined groups in the space are resilient because they occupy a particular ideological niche that will continue to attract a particular set of fighters, namely the AQ hardliners that have increasingly been alienated by HTS's behavior. HTS will then likely just allow Hurras ad-Din to quietly continue its operations, whatever those operations may be in so far as it is not immediately jeopardizing HTS's primary priority of securing greater Idlib. In so far as this is true, Al-Qaeda actually stands to benefit because it has diversified its holdings. It has a number of different groups and a set of diverse fighters that are aligned with Al-Qaeda ambitions and operate within this space. These different groups are pursuing different tactics to achieve longterm Al-Qaeda ambitions and ultimately Al-Qaeda only needs one of these agendas to succeed, to truly achieve its intent in Syria.

Nick:

Isabel, that was quite a detailed breakdown of the interactions between the Al-Qaeda linked groups in greater Idlib. And I just want to emphasize your conclusion. Al-Qaeda is likely not going anywhere in Syria and we need to be prepared for Al-Qaeda's continued haven in Syria to present a threat to the US, its partners and its allies for years to come unless something is done about Al-Qaeda in Syria. Isabel, thank you for joining us today.

Isabel:

Thanks for having me, Nick. And thank you all for joining us for this episode of the Overwatch podcast. We'll be keeping our persistent steer on the Al-Qaeda ecosystem in Syria and keep an eye out for the latest from Isabel on this topic of vital importance to US national security policy.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

Contact us: For press inquiries, email press@understandingwar.org