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Syria's 'Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham' Current Constraints and Future Options

Abdul Ghani Mezouz

Since the first statement it issued on January 24 2012, Al-Nusra Front (NF) attempted to draw a new 'jihadist' path that is different from those taken by other 'jihadist' movements. Therefore, the NF bet on the popular depth, field effectiveness, flexibility of positions, and focus on overthrowing the Syrian regime and dismantling its institutions as a revolutionary target shared by all revolutionary forces, without engaging in a global conflict that could embarrass the revolution and make it a target for its enemies.

On April 9 2013, the priorities of Al-Nusra Front temporarily changed when Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi announced that Syria's Al-Nusra Front merged with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Soon after that, Abu Mohammed al-Julani, the head of Al-Nusra Front in Syria, pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri and distanced his group from claims it had merged with ISIL in Iraq. "The sons of al-Nusra Front pledge allegiance to Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri," Abu Mohammed al-Julani said in an audio message. Also, he added, "we were not consulted" on an announcement by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of a merger with al-Nusra Front."

In a few months, Al-Julani succeeded in re-establishing the Al-Nusra Front and arranging it internally, using his Jihadist experience and the al-Qaeda umbrella, which attracted a large number of jihadists around him. The NF has since become a difficult figure in the equation of the Syrian revolution.

Al-Nusra Front participated in most of the major battles of the Syrian revolution, and observers unanimously recognize its effectiveness, the significant roles it played,

bravery of its fighters, and reliance on unique military tactics that were behind winning many battles in favor of the rebels. In fact, Al-Nusra Front made a qualitative breakthrough in the military situation of the Syrian revolution by using booby-trapped vehicles, remotely piloted vehicles, and infiltration in the depth of the regime's fortifications and positions.

On March 28 2015, Al-Nusra Front together with a rebel grouping, known as Jaish al-Fatah (Conquest Army), seized Idlib – as the second province that fell in the hands of rebels after Raqqa.

HTS and Classification Concerns

There was an increasing demand for the Al-Nusra Front's disengagement from Al-Qaeda organization, as this connection was used by several factions as an excuse to reject alliance with the front. Also, international and regional powers practiced pressure on other rebel factions to isolate Al-Nusra Front, as the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, and stop any coordination with it in battles.

Following repeated setbacks of the opposition forces in Aleppo, the fragmentation of its military formations, and failure of its joint operations rooms to manage battles – mass demonstrations erupted in liberated areas demanding that the revolutionary factions unite and merge together. However, major factions did not respond positively to the calls of demonstrators. Also, different initiatives to unify all revolutionary forces in one entity were rejected under the pretext that Al-Nusra Front was classified by the U.S. administration as a terrorist group and that uniting with the front means targeting the revolution and depriving it of external support.

On June 1, 2016, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced agreement with the United States on coordinating their military action against Al-Nusra Front, and launching joint airstrikes against the al Qaeda-linked group. Therefore, the US-led international

coalition urged the opposition forces to move away from the locations of the NF to avoid shelling. In response to these developments, Abu Mohammed al-Julani had no choice but to disengage his group from Al-Qaeda. On July 28, 2016, he announced that Al-Nusra Front split from al-Qaeda, and that its new name was Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (Levant Conquest Front). Al-Julani said the move was intended to remove the pretext used by major powers, including the US and Russia, to bomb Syrians. However, the US responded immediately by saying it saw no reason to change its view of the group as a terrorist organization.

The repercussions of announcing Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) as a local revolutionary faction not linked to al-Qaeda made little difference in the revolutionary scene in Syria, as the fragmentation and division of the opposition forces continued. Also, the armed factions backtracked on their previous promises to merge with Al-Nusra Front in a unified revolutionary body if they ended their links with al-Qaeda.

At the time, White House Spokesman Josh Earnest said that Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham was still considered a terrorist organization by the United States which had increasing concerns that the group intended to attack the West. "The United States continues to assess that Nusra Front leaders maintain the intent to conduct eventual attacks in and against the West and there continues to be increasing concern about Nusra Front's growing capacity for external operations that could threaten both the United States and Europe," he said. Then came the statement of US envoy to Syria Michael Ratney in further detail about his country's position towards the new-branded jihadist group, amid decay of liberated land and loss of more strategic sites by the rebels in favor of the regime forces on many fronts. Also, attacks against Jabhat Fatah al-Sham were accelerating. On January 1, 2017, an intensified bombing campaign by manned and unmanned US military aircraft targeted Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in Idlib, killing more than 100 elements.

On January 23 2017, coinciding with Russian-orchestrated Syrian peace talks in Astana, Kazakhstan, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham attacked moderate rebel groups in northwestern Syria. Rebel groups fighting under the Free Syrian Army (FSA) banner, some of which attended peace talks in Astana, accused the jihadist group of launching a surprise attack on their positions, forcing them to dissolve themselves or merge with Ahrar Al-Sham movement. Jabhat Fatah al-Sham issued a statement on Jan. 24 saying that it had been forced to act preemptively to “thwart conspiracies” being hatched against it. The group accused rebels attending the Kazakhstan talks of conspiring against it, but did not refer to the previous day’s fighting directly.

The sudden military action of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham resulted in a dramatic change in the map of the revolutionary forces. The JFS imposed itself as a powerful military force with power and influence in the context of what it considered as urgent measures to "correct the course of the revolution" by dismantling the factions that were positive with the proposals for a political solution to the crisis, "in attempt to re-produce the regime and criminalize the effective factions of the revolution, according to the JTS statement on Jan. 1, 2017, re-proposing a plan for unity and integration into a unified revolutionary entity.

On January 28, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) issued a statement announcing that it had agreed to merge with four smaller factions and form a new alliance, ‘Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham’ (Levant Liberation Organization). The statement said JFS joined forces with the Nour al-Din Zinki Movement, one of the most important opposition factions in Aleppo province; Ansar al-Din Front; the Homs-based Jaysh al-Sunnah; and Liwa al-Haqq, which operates in Idlib, Aleppo and Hama provinces. Hashim al-Sheikh - also known as Abu Jabir, who had previously been the head of the Islamist rebel group Ahrar al-Sham, later splitted from it and formed Jaish Al-Ahrar - was named as leader of the newly-formed grouping of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

It seems that the new organization clearly cut all connections with al-Qaeda and adopted a discourse in which the concepts of the revolution occupied a prominent position. However, the international reaction of major powers and opponents of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham internally remained unchanged. According to various statements, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham was still a front for hiding Al-Qaeda behind it. According to testimonies circulated after the HTS formation, some jihadist hardliners, such as Abu-Khadija and Abu-Julaybib (Both Jordanian) did not agree to the establishment of the new entity and renewed allegiance to Al-Qaeda Chief Ayman Al-Zawahri. They preferred to step aside and stay in the shadow, abandoning any factions or military groupings.

On March 10 2017 US envoy to Syria Michael Ratney announced in a statement in Arabic that Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham is a terrorist organization., and threatened to target it and its allied groups The statement said, “The core of HTS is Nusra Front, a designated terrorist org. This designation applies regardless of what name it uses or what groups merge into it.” It is remarkable that Michael Ratney used a language that was far from the language of diplomats, including religious terms and concepts usually used by some jurists in response to the HTS approaches and stances. “The murders of other parties, bloodshed and theft exposes the entrenched ideology of Al-Qaeda and fatawas and Sharia judges of the organization; changing the name of the group does not change this fact,” Ratney said in his statement. It is noteworthy that Ratney later used the same language in another statement on August 2 while commenting on HTS seizure of most liberated land after battles with Ahrar Al-Sham movement.

The limited fighting between Ahrar Al-Sham movement and Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham on July 17 2017 at the backdrop of accusing Ahrar Al-Sham of harboring killers of HTS elements – that were affiliated to Soqour Al-Sham (Levant Hawks) small faction which earlier joined Ahrar Al-Sham. The fighting between the two factions resulted in the rise

of the HTS as the largest faction in Syria and the decline of Ahrar Al-Sham's power significantly. And while some believed that the HTS would dismantle Ahrar Al-Sham once and for all, especially that most of its leaders left for Turkey and that its large brigades joined the HTS; however the latter chose to retain the faction and issued a circular to its fighters warning them of attacking its personnel or stripping them of their weapons.

Idlib in the heart of the storm

Idlib in northern Syria found itself in the heart of the storm when local and international voices threatened to destroy the city similarly to what happened in the Iraqi city of Mosul if it remained under the control of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham. It has become clear that there is a serious international trend to attack the city after liberation of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, and settlement of the situation in the eastern Ghouta – especially after major factions there reached a consensus on an initial formula for a political solution starting with reconciliation).

Over the past period, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham has tried to crystallize its own vision of the reality and fate of the revolutionary scene in Syria, and re-read it in light of the latest developments and events, most notably:

- The fate of the liberated areas in northern Syria with regard to intentions of major powers to target it;
- The attitude towards a likely Turkish intervention if it started;
- The HTS stance towards the de-escalation zones, the truces, and reconciliations concluded by some factions with the Bashar al-Assad regime.

Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham finds itself responsible for the revolutionary effort and management of the liberated areas since it has control over the liberated areas and the axis of engagement with the regime's forces, especially in northern Syria.

If we look at the options available to Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham in the context of international hostility against it, we will find that there are limited options and narrow margins of maneuver, especially in light of the fact that the HTS is a revolutionary jihadist body that cannot go far in the course of "moderation" according to the American concept of the word, and at the same time cannot dispense with the jihadist identity, as its Salafist jihadism is still its main tributary and jihadists are still its solid base.

Option 1: Activation of broad civil administration

The administration of the liberated areas and securing the population's basic needs is a real challenge for the revolutionary factions, as it consequently requires security control, maintenance of vital facilities such as electricity, water, and hospitals and supplying their provisions, establishment of Islamic courts, and conflict resolution, etc. This effort was entirely undertaken by the military factions, which often committed violations related to use of force, profiting through imposition of arbitrary fines at the checkpoints to allow passage of goods, in addition to manipulation and relief material trafficking.

On July 23, 2017, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham presented an initiative for approving a comprehensive and broad 'civil administration' in the liberated areas. The HTS's new trend came to achieve three basic objectives:

First: to remove the pretext of major powers and deprive them of justification for targeting liberated areas, particularly the city of Idlib.

Second: to develop and improve the administrative performance in liberated areas through involving people in managing their affairs away from sectarian quotas.

Third: to limit the tasks of revolutionary forces to fighting at fronts and battle hubs, leaving administration for civilians and municipalities.

Over the past few weeks, officials of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham have been active in publicizing the ‘civil administration’ plan and sent letters and invitations to a number of revolutionary leaders and activists to explain the idea and urge them to support and participate in it. Although the details of the plan are still unclear and deliberations are still ongoing, however, leaked information indicate that the plan’s broad lines include departure of all factions from cities, except for some groups of the Syrian Free Army, and the formation of municipalities with wide powers to be responsible for managing the liberated areas, aided by an executive force. In fact, it seems that there is keenness from the HTS on involving all revolutionary rivals in this task whatever their ideological backgrounds were. Observers close to Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham’s decision-making circles said that retaining Ahrar Al-Sham movement – with the possibility of dismantling it with the least losses – was in order to include them in the broad ‘civil administration’ plan.

Some leaders of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham do not hide the fact that the proposed “civil administration” in the liberated areas in the north is an unpredictable adventure, but it remains a rational option under the insistence of the international powers on designating Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham as a terrorist organization and preparing for bombing its positions and strongholds in the coming days.

Despite the flexibility shown by the HTP leadership in putting forward a plan with such audacity, yet it is certain that the project will not be welcomed by the international community and its active forces. It seems that Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham bets on gaining some positions in its favor, especially the Turkish position which appeared to understand the new reality on the other side of the Bab al-Hawa crossing.

The most important challenge for the HTS leadership lies in convincing its hard-line jihadist nucleus of the legitimacy of the idea of ‘civil administration’, and providing real guarantees to reassure them. In fact, only Abu Mohammad al-Julani is able to influence this important component within the HTS. Therefore, the initiative presented by the HTS is complex and sensitive, and requires a great deal of intelligence and boldness because it raises the contradicting ideas of revolutionary rivals. Also, the poor implementation on the ground or putting obstacles in its way – the usual practice of counter-revolutions – could open the door wide to chaos and turmoil.

If the ‘civil administration’ plan in the liberated areas succeeded, it would be a suitable platform for greater consensus among the components of the Syrian revolution. It would also put an end to the negative outcomes of sectarian allocations, including competition for influence and fragmentation of liberated areas by military barriers. The adoption of a unified judicial system and one executive body would stop completely the chaos of the multiplicity of courts due to the multiple factions.

The flexibility in rhetoric and dynamism in action and practice would be calculated for the jihadist current in case of the plan’s success. It is noteworthy that this is not the jihadists’ first experience in this regard. After Al-Qaeda took control of the Yemeni city of Mukalla, it adopted a pattern of civil administration through municipalities for managing the affairs of the city.

Option 2: Return to guerrilla warfare

After the departure of armed opposition forces from the city of Aleppo, following the adoption of the Syrian regime and its Russian ally the policy of scorched earth, and the inability of the opposition to withstand the progress of the Assad forces backed by Hezbollah militia and Iranian Quds Force, some revolutionary and jihadist voices put forward the idea of adopting a new strategy based on the principles of guerrilla warfare

as a method of fighting that drains opponents with the least potential and the least losses. The idea was met with explicit rejection from some moderate factions and revolutionary figures because it meant – according to them – to transform a wide-range popular revolution that has got broad international sympathy, to some fighting groups in mountains and caves. However, other jihadist figures and factions defended the idea and considered it a reasonable option in light of the huge military superiority of the regime camp and its allies.

Undoubtedly, the revolutionary factions affiliated with the jihadist current views guerrilla warfare as the most effective way to manage wars and conflicts under the domination of the new world order. Well-known jihadist ideologue Omar Abdel-Hakim (Abu Musab al-Suri) was the most prominent advocate for the guerrilla warfare. The jihadists practiced this type of warfare and employed its techniques against both regimes and foreign intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Mali and elsewhere. With the decline of revolutionary armed performance due to the strategy of direct confrontation, land keeping, fixed fronts, and exposed positions, the recalling of guerrilla warfare is an inevitable option that could protect some of the momentum of revolutions, as jihadists believe.

Perhaps the ‘civil administration’ initiative in the liberated areas, proposed by Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham, is only a final measure before the adoption of the guerrilla warfare strategy. Entrusting the municipalities with the task of managing public affairs, and restricting the role of rebel factions to fighting amid the HTS’s recent intensification of security operations in the heart of regime-controlled areas indicates that the revolution is on the verge of a new turn, most likely characterized by the style of guerrilla warfare. It is not the task of the guerrillas to manage the cities, take care of people's affairs, resolve their conflicts and secure their needs.

Since its establishment, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham has carried out dozens of military and security operations against the Al-Assad regime and its allies, only one of which cannot be considered a tactic of guerrilla warfare: The operation which was announced on March 21 2017 and codenamed “Act!”, targeted having control over the regime's positions in the northern Hama countryside and progressing towards the center of the city but the operation was halted before all its phases were completed due to the heavy aerial bombardment by the Russian air force. All other HTS operations (dozens) were carried out in accordance with the principles and foundations of guerrilla warfare. It is remarkable that these operations were successful and well-established, where the HTS fighting groups succeeded in penetrating the depth of the regime-controlled areas and carrying out their flash operations there. This indicates that there is intensive and high-level training on this type of operations, perhaps in preparation for its approval during the next phase.

These operations included:

- a) Storming the Political Security building and the State Security building in Homs on February 25 2017 and killing a number of high-ranking officers.
- b) An HTS armed group was deployed in the Damascus Joubar district on March 19 2017, and controlled the positions of the regime there, killing a number of its soldiers.
- c) On June 16 2017, the HTS carried out a qualitative operation in al-Baida Port in Latakia and detonated a car bomb inside it.

The HTS also carried out a number of similar qualitative operations in Kalamoun and also in the northern Homs countryside.

The HTS leadership has been keen on forming highly trained and efficient military groups called “elite forces”. Although there is no sufficient information regarding the numbers of HTS elite forces, their powers, and nature of missions assigned to them,

but their operations are characterized by the surprise attack, penetration of the depth of regime positions, and the swift execution and withdrawal.

The question is: Are these forces only a fighting vanguard prepared to launch a guerrilla war that could last for years?

Summary

Al-Julani left the Iraqi territories in 2011 with a written plan approved by al-Baghdadi in order to establish a jihadist movement in Syria, benefiting from his experience in Iraq since the early days of its occupation. This experience, in addition to his jihadist school – that focuses on the wide-range dimensions of the conflict and conducts an overall analysis of its data and details – have strengthened the man's vision for the future. Accordingly, obsession with the future and the fate of the revolution was among the determinants of the revolutionary action of Al-Nusra Front, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, and recently Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham. Therefore, the options of the 'civil administration' plan in the liberated areas and preparation for the 'guerrilla warfare' came after an extensive reading from the "jihadist" group of both the reality and the future.

Any convergence between the HTS and Turkey could be a key to less dark prospects for the liberated areas in northern Syria, but the fluctuations of the Turkish position towards the HTS kept the two parties' relationship tense and open to all possibilities. For example:

- During the HTS fight for having control over northern Syria Turkey kept silent and did not try to strengthen the military position of its allied Syrian opposition forces while they were losing their last strongholds overlooking Turkey, a step that was considered by some as a Turkish understanding of the HTS military activity. At the time, Turkish some officials expressed satisfaction after the HTS's handover of the Bab al-Hawa

crossing to an independent civil administration. This Turkish position drew strongly-worded statements from the United States, which accused Turkey of complicity with al Qaeda to facilitate its control of Idlib and its countryside.

- A few days later after a meeting with Iranian Chief of Staff Mohammad Baqeri, Turkish President Erdogan said that Turkey and Iran could carry out joint operations against terrorism in Syria. Some observers suggested that the Turkish-Iranian cooperation could be in launching a military operation in Idlib.

The failed coup d'état in Turkey, the rise of President Donald Trump to power in the United States, the deepening Gulf crisis that cast a shadow over the revolutionary scene in Syria, the defeat of ISIL in Mosul and Syria, the truces and reconciliations with the Al-Assad regime signed by some revolutionary factions, and suspension of support to the forces of moderate opposition – all these developments on the domestic, regional, and international arenas mean that those among the rebels that are still convinced of and adhering to the validity of the military option against the Al-Assad regime must rely on their own potential and accordingly recall the principles of guerrilla warfare into the arena of revolutionary action, especially that the proposed ‘civil administration’ plan is not likely to be accepted by the major powers although it is accepted and welcomed by the residents of the liberated areas in northern Syria.

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