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The Campaign over Idlib: The Dilemmas Facing the Salafi-Jihadist Organizations in Syria

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The campaign to conquer the Idlib governorate, the collapse of the relevant agreements, and President Assad's determination, with Russian support, to return the region to his sovereignty could pose an existential dilemma for the Salafi-jihadist organizations operating there. At that point, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the central force opposing Assad and an example of a Salafi-jihadist organization that has evinced pragmatism and openness toward the Syrian locals, will have two main options: fighting to the end and subsequently breaking into quasi-independent terrorist cells (similar to the Islamic State's method in eastern Syria), or relinquishing its assets in the framework of a political arrangement. The other radical groups operating in the arena, including Hurras ad-Din, which is identified with al-Qaeda, may take cover in the mountainous, forested region in northwestern Syria and fight a guerilla war against "the enemies of Islam," or try to flee Syria and join the global jihadist camp. If international terrorist attacks are renewed, "Syrian alumni" could also pose a threat to Israeli and Jewish targets abroad.

Over the years of the civil war in Syria, the jihadist organization Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (the Organization for the Liberation of the Levant) has gone through changes and reversals in its political and ideological affiliations: from beginning operation in 2012 as the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, under the name Jabhat a-Nusra, to distancing itself from the parent organization, while gradually adopting pragmatism and moderate rhetoric. The organization has become a kind of model of a Salafi-jihadist group that operates with a local-national identity, without forfeiting its ideological and religious adherence. Its main mission is fighting against the Assad regime, and it maintains relations with regional forces that are considered infidels, or at least allies of the enemies of Salafi jihadism, such as Turkey. This approach led to friction with al-Qaeda and later to the break-off of a "rogue" faction that established the organization Hurras ad-Din, which is identified with it.

Five years after the rebels took over the Idlib Governorate, the fate of the organization and other Salafi-jihadist organizations could be sealed following the collapse of the de-escalation zone agreement and the Sochi agreement, and President Bashar al-Assad's determination, with Russia's support, to restore his sovereignty in the governorate, which

is the rebels' last stronghold. Since December 2019, a campaign for Idlib has been underway, and has already led to significant achievements for the Syrian army and the supporting Shiite militias. Chief among them is distancing the rebels' fire from infrastructure sites in Aleppo and Hama, and recapturing the important transportation and commerce route – the Aleppo Damascus highway (M5). On March 5, 2020, after a round of fighting that included Turkish involvement against Assad's army, Presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan signed an agreement regarding Idlib (an appendix to the de-escalation zone agreement of 2017) that includes a ceasefire, the establishment of a buffer along the highway to Latakia, and the initiation of joint patrols.

The next objective of the Syrian army is to recapture the Aleppo-Latakia (M4) highway, which connects northern Syria with the coast. This would likely push the rebel organizations northwards to the enclave near the border with Turkey – a mountainous, forested area that is difficult to navigate, where last year the Syrian army, despite large scale military input, suffered one of its defeats at the hands of the rebel organizations, with hundreds of soldiers killed.

Once the rebels are pushed away from the road to Latakia, a direct Syrian-Russian campaign is expected in Idlib, with the involvement of the "Shia International" – the Shiite militias from Afghanistan and Pakistan, led by Iran and Hezbollah. The campaign will pose an existential dilemma for Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Hurras ad-Din, and foreign Salafi-jihadist organizations operating there. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham will have to decide in principle regarding the future of the Syrian jihadist enterprise in general and the question of its survival in particular. At that point, the organization will be in a position of do or die. The scenario that was brought up in the past as the lesser evil (in order to prevent a humanitarian crisis) – in which a "Gaza of Syria" would be established in Idlib, a kind of "fortified emirate" that would maintain a long term *hudna* (ceasefire) with Assad under the de facto control of an Islamist organization struggling against groups more radical than it – is slipping away. The military defeat of the organization seems closer than ever, and Turkey, which was meant to be a neighboring "power" acting as a sponsor, could prove to be a broken rail.

Under these circumstances, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham will face two main options: one is to fight to the bitter end, followed by the break-up of the organization that is built on a strong chain of command and structured hierarchy into a network of autonomous guerilla and terrorist cells that would operate in northwestern Syria. This would mean postponing the realization of the *tamkeen* – territorial control of a piece of land under an Islamic way of life. This path would mirror the Islamic State's mode of operation over the past year, when the organization was militarily eliminated. Its cells continue to operate on both sides of the Syria-Iraq border, attacking stationary or mobile military targets and even essential

infrastructure sites such as oil fields and natural gas facilities. There would then be military instability and a lack of security in northwestern Syria for an extended period of time. The second option is a conscious decision to dissolve the organization and merge its operatives within other Islamist and revolutionary frameworks (such as Ahrar al-Sham or Faylaq al-Sham, which are seen as less threatening) as part of a future political arrangement. This step, even if it is considered drastic, could, in accordance with the circumstances, be based on pragmatic reasoning as well as ideological considerations, and in particular the assessment that dispersing the organization – an idea that is permitted according to Islam, and was raised previously and rejected outright – would prevent the destruction of an Islamic force and a humanitarian catastrophe.

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham has adopted a clear pragmatic outlook since it separated from al-Qaeda and renounced elements within it that presented radical positions, thus creating a distinction in Idlib between "extreme" and "more extreme," and between "local Syrian" with national tendencies and "immigrant" with global aspirations. However, the organization's pragmatic approach pushed it out of al-Qaeda's system of alliances and even expanded the range of its activities from exclusively military activity to civilian management through the establishment of the "rescue government," managing local councils and associations and taking over the border crossings as sources of income. In this way, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham became a covert partner of Turkey in attempts at a regional settlement, for example, in making trade and population exchange deals and in operative coordination with Turkish intelligence officers. Thus, it may be that dispersing the organization will be an option easier to swallow for both the organization's leadership and the Syrian operatives.

As a Salafi-jihadist organization, the gradual ideological changes that Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham has experienced, especially over the past two years, were not spontaneous, but an expression of a new strategy that characterizes the trend of decentralization and localization of the global jihadist movement as a whole: transitioning from international jihad to national-local struggle, or alternatively, transitioning from jihad led by "elitist pioneers" such as al-Qaeda to jihad that relies on a broad, local popular base. Such trends can help the organization relinquish its assets and operate in alternative frameworks that are more acceptable and legitimate in the eyes of the local public and in the eyes of the international community, even if this change is likely to involve many difficulties.

Dissolution of the standard-bearer of the jihadist camp in Syria is likely to face strong resistance from the foreign and radical elements within the ranks of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, as well as outside of it, for example, in Hurras ad-Din and among foreign fighters – the Chinese Uyghurs, members of the Turkistan Islamic Party, and Uzbek, Chechen, Saudi, North African, and other fighters operating in the Idlib region. For these groups, Hay'at

Tahrir al-Sham's partners-rivals — which are currently completely dependent on it for their survival and traditionally oppose relations between it and the Turks, whom they see as "secularists" and as part of "the idolatry conspirators" — there appears to remain only one option: to take cover in the mountainous region, the Tora Bora of northwestern Syria, to fight a guerrilla war against the enemies of Allah and *sharia* and die the death of martyrs. Alternatively, they could try to flee Syria and join the global Salafi-jihadist camp to continue the campaign.

Presumably the future of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham will be bound up with the international and regional agreements achieved regarding Idlib and the security arrangements that will be imposed on the region, first and foremost by Russia and Turkey, and subject to the next actions taken by Assad's forces with Iranian backing and Hezbollah's assistance. However, its fate could also be determined by its own choices.

Will Abu Mohammad al-Julani, the leader of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham who has shown adaptability and measured pragmatism, and who has successfully read the changing map, be willing to join a new pro-Turkish Syrian organizational framework while maintaining a "moderate" Islamist identity that is not perceived as endangering the region's security, thus saving his organization and the Idlib Governorate from destruction? Alternatively, given the tightening noose and the loss of many hundreds of his operatives, will he choose to return to his militant roots in order to immortalize the lofty ideals of the jihadist camp and to die a martyr's death? It is possible that al-Julani himself will be removed by one of his enemies, internal or external, leaving the jihadist camp and his organization as a flock without a shepherd.

It is possible that the reinforcement of Turkish forces, in face of the Assad army's efforts to capture the Idlib region, and perhaps even the spread of the coronavirus, will put the battle to conquer Idlib on hold. This would provide more time to Salafi-jihadist groups before they are forced to make fateful decisions.

For Israel, the fate of Salafi-jihadists in Idlib is not an immediate source of military concern. There is the possibility that groups from the Salafi-jihadist camp will relocate to the southern Golan, or that an enclave of such forces will remain holed up in remote places in the Syrian desert far from Israel's borders. Another disturbing possibility is well-trained Salafi-jihadist forces fleeing Syria to various places around the world and reinforcing the manpower serving the global Salafi-jihadist camp. If there is a renewed international wave of terrorist attacks, "Syrian alumni" could also pose a danger to Israeli and Jewish targets abroad.