

RESISTING HAYAT TAHRIR AL-SHAM



Syrian Civil Society on the Frontlines
by **Haid Haid**

تَبْنِي ثَوْرَةَ
adopt a revolution



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IDLIB

Idlib, a north-western province of Syria, is a rural area and was considered one of the poorest and most conservative regions of the country before the war. In recent years, thousands of civilians and militants from all parts of Syria have been displaced to Idlib under so-called „evacuation agreements“. Three out of four people in the region today are dependent on humanitarian aid.

إدلب

ATARIB

Atarib, located some 25 kilometers west of the city of Aleppo, serves as a strategic transport hub between the city of Aleppo, the northern countryside of the neighboring Idlib governorate, and the Bab al-Hawa border crossing on the Syrian–Turkish border.

أتاب

SARAQIB

Saraqib is a city in northwestern Syria located east of Idlib. It serves as a strategic transport hub between the city of Aleppo and different provinces such as Idlib, Hama, Homs and Damascus.

سراقب

MAARAT AL-NU'MAN

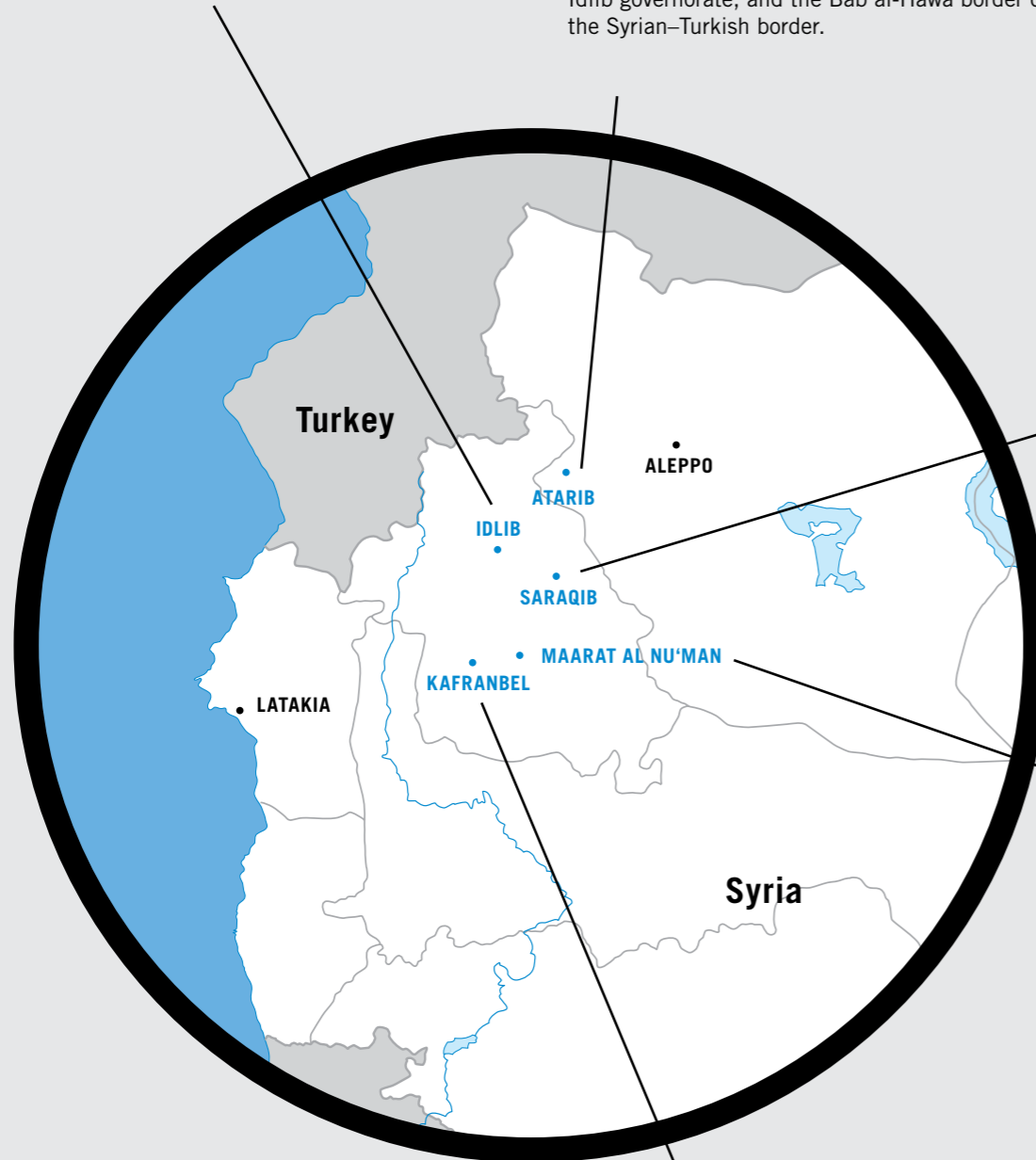
Maarat al-Nu'man is a city in northwestern Syria located at the highway between Aleppo and Hama. The city is known for its resistance to HTS forces, despite the military victory of the latter against the local armed group Division 13.

معرة النعمان

KAFRANBEL

Kafranbel is a small town in Idlib's southern countryside. It has become known for its banners which attempt to address different political and military dynamics through witty and sarcastic messages.

كفرنبيل



EDITORIAL

Starting in 2013, scores of Syrian cities fell under the control of radical Islamist groups such as the Al-Nusra Front or the “Islamic State (IS)”. Some cities, however, succeeded in warding off the attempts of jihadist groups at expanding their territories. Moreover, their success can evidently not be attributed to military factors alone: Wide parts of the populations of Atarib and Maarat Al-Nu’man, for instance, rose to demonstrate against the attempted takeovers of jihadist militias – who were indeed eventually coerced into retreat. Why were civilians in these cities driven to protest, while hardly any resistance against jihadist militias emerged elsewhere? What role is bestowed on civil society in the movement to fend off radical Islamist takeover attempts? What role do civil administrative structures play? Which circumstances and what kind of support are required for civil players to put up a fight against fundamentalist militias in their localities? This study, conducted by Syrian author Haid Haid, is to be understood not as an ultimate answer to these questions, but rather as an initial exploration which seeks to introduce a much needed new perspective. This becomes necessary given that the analyses and debates established in Germany, when it comes to the Middle East and the “War on Terror”, oftentimes remain depressingly superficial. It is frequently insinuated that the population is comprised of neatly defined monolithic blocks such as “the Kurds”, “the Arabs” or “the Sunnis” instead of politically thinking and acting individuals. The role of local civilian and civil-society stakeholders is therefore often neglected – usually in favour of dissolute geopolitical digressions.

By contrast, this study dares to focus on a detailed close-up: The “big picture” is set aside for a clear view on local political disputes. That renders differentiation a necessity. This analysis reveals that the military dominance of a militia in an area does not necessarily mean that the militia also exerts political power over that territory. And it demonstrates that, as disconcerting as it may sound to some, terror organisations are not alike. While the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham militia (HTS) at the centre of this study shares the black flag, a gruelling jihadist ideology and its roots in al-Qaida with the so-called “Islamic State”, they differ in many respects – particularly with regard to their strategies for seizing power and their treatment of the civilian population. These subtle differences not only generate greater complexity but also draw attention to new strategies against jihadist terror. The analysis devised by Syrian author Haid Haid reveals: If only the political will existed, nonviolent strategies of conflict transformation could at least serve to contain the expansion of extremist militias. And Syrian civil society can and must fulfil a vital role in such a process.

Adopt a Revolution team

SUMMARY

01 In the absence of a convenient military option in the face of HTS which can defeat the group and gain local support, civil resistance seems to be the best option available. Such a struggle relies on mixed methods that allow locals to organize themselves and disrupt the patterns of cooperation and obedience as well as human and material resources that HTS depends on in order to contain the group and weaken its legitimacy and support base. Local communities, after all, are the main actors that can enable HTS to flourish or bring it to an end.

02 The restrictions imposed by HTS on civil society work depend largely on how influential HTS is in the respective area and the type of work being carried out. Humanitarian organisations are allowed to operate in areas controlled by HTS. But such permissions come with enforced requirements, such as imposed taxation (atawat) on organisations providing aid. As for civil society organisations, HTS does not seem to completely forbid them. Such activities, however, are tolerated only under strict conditions and are subject to close monitoring. Furthermore, civil society work is easier in areas where HTS has limited influence.

03 The nonviolent resistance strategies deployed against HTS are similar to the ones used against both the Syrian regime and ISIS. Organising demonstrations and public events is the most popular tactic. A more passive war of logos and slogans also usually takes place in the background to achieve a symbolic and visual supremacy. Likewise, satire is one of the main tools that activists have at their disposal to undermine HTS and its legitimacy.

04 HTS uses the provision of public services to generate community support and recruit members. To this end, HTS attempts to disband local governing institutions and replace them with its affiliate governing bodies. To counter such efforts, civil society organisations contribute to increasing the efficiency and legitimacy of local institutions to make them hard to replace. It may not always be possible to stop HTS attempts but supporting local governing institutions makes it more difficult for HTS to purge them.

05 Most of the organisations' work to create local resistance to HTS takes place before direct confrontations with the latter. Nonetheless, the role of civil society groups does not end there, as many of them continue to play important roles during skirmishes between HTS and locals. Undermining HTS' logic of violence and finding holes in the group's justifications is a common tactic. Mobilising local communities to protest in the streets and show collective rejection is also popular.

06 Civil resistance is like any other strategy; it works better in some areas than others. Therefore, it is important to pay special attention to the enabling factors that allow some civil groups to be more successful than others. The existence of a functioning governance apparatus and reliable services is a key factor in preventing HTS from exploiting such domains as recruiting tools. Likewise, it is vital to establish strong relationships between civil society and local governing bodies as it provides such groups with official protection and legitimacy. The more organised and united the community is, the greater the chance it has to resist HTS' influence and imposed entities.

01 INTRODUCTION

¹ Despite HTS' limited public use of violence, especially in comparison to ISIS, it has been using other forms of violence such as threats, intimidation, detention, torture etc.

² Haid, H. (2017), 'Local Community Resistance to Extremist Groups in Syria: Lessons from Atarib', Chatham House, June 2017, <https://www.chatham-house.org/publication/local-community-resistance-extremist-groups-syria-lessons-atarib> (accessed 21 July 2017).

³ Local administration councils are created by local actors to serve as an alternative to the Syrian regime. They are in charge of running opposition-held areas and providing public services to local populations.

⁴ In this research paper, 'civil society' is used in a broad sense to refer to activists, local movements and initiatives, local relief organisations, governing bodies and local organisations working in the public sphere.

⁵ Author interview via Skype with activist Mosaab, a field coordinator working with a group focusing on conflict resolution, 20 July 2017.

In the province of Idlib and the west of rural Aleppo, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) control has significantly risen since the beginning of 2017. Following the recent defeat of Ahrar al-Sham in July 2017, which until then was perceived as the biggest rebel group, HTS has become by far the most powerful military group in northern Syria without much contest. However, the group seems to be struggling to match its military gains with a similar level of community support in the territories it controls or operates in. That became apparent when locals in many areas, notably in Maarat al-Nu'man, Atarib and Saraqib, took to the streets demonstrating against HTS attacks and projecting their unwillingness to cave in to HTS' authority.

Despite isolated violent incidents against locals where the latter were shot at and some were even killed, HTS shied away from publically using violence against civilians.¹ Fearing a repeat of similar angry public responses that triggered the popular local armed resistance to ISIS in 2014², HTS began to focus on enforcing its dominance by taking control of civilian affairs rather than using direct violence.

To this end, HTS has attempted to take total control of civilian affairs through an initiative titled 'The Civil Administration for Services', a civilian wing to govern rebel-held areas and to oversee or replace local councils³ and civil society organisations (CSOs)⁴.

To legitimize its civilian front, HTS reached out to well-known revolutionary figures, religious scholars and community leaders requesting them to join the newly established Civil Administration. Most of those individuals rejected HTS' invitation due to ideological differences as well as HTS' violations and practices. Notably, while some of the above mentioned figures have always resisted HTS influence, others have even started to actively express their ideological disagreement with the group as they fear the prospect of suffering a similar fate to Raqqa where many military forces are fighting ISIS without much regard for human or material losses.⁵

In the absence of a convenient military option in the face of HTS which can defeat the group and gain local support, civil resistance seems to be the best option available. Such a struggle relies on mixed methods that allow locals to organize themselves and disrupt the patterns of cooperation and obedience as well as human and material resources that HTS depends on in order to contain the group and weaken its legitimacy and support base. Local communities, after all, are the main actors who have the capacity to allow HTS to flourish or bring it to an end.

This paper aims to contribute to fostering a better understanding of the role that local Syrian civil society groups can play in resisting extremist groups such as HTS in Syria. To achieve that, it analyses the restrictions imposed by HTS on the work of civil society organisations and activists in areas HTS controls or has a presence in. This paper then examines the different tactics deployed by Syrian civil society groups in the context of both peaceful and armed resistance to HTS. Finally, it attempts to contribute to the ongoing discussion about how to deal with areas under HTS influence as well as the civil society groups and local governing bodies that operate inside them.

Central to the research for this paper is a set of semi-structured interviews with 10 Syrian civil society groups. These were conducted online by the author over Skype or WhatsApp between July and October 2017. The interviewees were selected based on recommendations from well-established Syrian activists and civil society groups. The identities of interviewees remain anonymous due to safety concerns. The interviews focused on different areas in northern Syria where HTS is trying to establish itself as the dominant force but local communities and activists are still resisting the group, as is the case in Atarib, Kafranbel, Maarat al-Nu'man, Saraqib etc. This paper does not claim to list all the resistance efforts pursued by different Syrian activists and organisations - on the contrary, it is just a primary effort to pave the way for additional studies on this topic.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

هيئة تحرير الشام

The group's name has changed several times since its rise in 2013. In July 2016 it changed its name from Jabhat al-Nusra to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham after breaking ties with al-Qaeda. The group renamed itself Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in January 2017, marking a large-scale merger with other Syrian rebel groups. For consistency, this paper refers to the group as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

02 RESTRICTIONS IMPOSED ON CIVIL SOCIETY

The risks and challenges facing Syrian organisations working in rebel-held areas are directly linked to the nature of the armed groups controlling or functioning in those areas. Thus, it is important to differentiate between the areas that are completely controlled by HTS and those in which the group has a presence but lacks the influence to dominate them.

„We usually divide the areas into three categories; The first one where HTS has full control and the risk is too high. In those areas, we limit our activities to underground work (such as graffiti) or we do not work at all. The second is where HTS has limited control but they are not the dominant force. Our activities in such areas aim to mobilize locals to actively resist HTS. The third is where HTS has an irrelevant or no presence at all, in which case we focus on maintaining local resilience to HTS.“⁶

Restrictions on humanitarian actors

However, the fluidity of the Syrian conflict and constant changes in the zones of influence prevent the pinning-down of those theoretical categories to specific territories at a given moment in time. The number of areas that are militarily controlled by HTS has significantly increased since the beginning of 2017 in the Idlib province where HTS has been able to defeat and replace a number of rebel groups while coercing others to merge with it. But unlike ISIS, which attempts to run its held territories exclusively, HTS is more flexible towards humanitarian organisations providing basic services in areas it dominates. That is because the pressure put on HTS to provide relief to local communities in such areas is alleviated through the work of humanitarian actors, but HTS is still able to claim credit for the provided relief work.

„The organisations providing aid or health services are usually welcomed in areas controlled by HTS as they alleviate the burden on the latter which does not have the needed resources. But this does not mean that those organisations are helping or promoting HTS as people will be the ones suffering if such aid is terminated because HTS operates there.“⁷

Nonetheless, working in such areas also comes with customary or enforced requirements. Multiple sources have reported that HTS imposes some sort of taxation (*atawat* or royalties)⁸ on organisations providing aid in areas under its influence.⁹

But unlike ISIS, which attempts to run its held territories exclusively, HTS is more flexible towards humanitarian organisations providing basic services in areas it dominates.



AFTER PROCLAIMING ITS SOLIDARITY WITH THE CHARLIE HEBDO MAGAZINE, THIS EDITION OF THE NEWSPAPER SOURIATNA („OUR SYRIA“) WAS CONFISCATED AND BURNED IN PUBLIC BY HTS. SOURIATNA IS A PROJECT PARTNER OF ADOPT A REVOLUTION.

⁶ Author interview via Skype with Mohammed, the coordinator of 24CR, a civil resistance group against extremism, 18 July 2017.

⁷ Author interview via Skype with Mustafa, a freelance trainer focusing on peace building, 19 July 2017.

⁸ Sham News Network, 'The Control of HTS Restricts the Work of Humanitarian Organisations' <http://www.sham.org/news/syria-news/> سطره-هيئة-تحرير-الشام-تقيد-عمل-المنظمات-الانسانية-وتخفق-المساعدات (accessed 10 Nov. 2017).

⁹ al-Dassouky, A. (2017), 'The Role of Jihadi Movements in Syrian Local Governance', Omran center, 14 July 2017, <http://en.omrandirasat.org/publications/papers/the-role-of-jihadi-movements-in-syrian-local-governance.html> (accessed 21 July 2017).

¹⁰ Author interview via Skype with activist Waleed, a team leader for a group supporting local governance, 3 July 2017.

¹¹ Author interview via Skype with activist Mosaab, a field coordinator working with a group focusing on conflict resolution, 20 July 2017.

¹² Author interview via Skype with activist Ammar, a community mobiliser, 4 October 2017.

¹³ Author interview via Skype with Sami, a relief worker, 25 July 2017.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Author interview via Skype with Ahmed, a media activist, 7 July 2017.

Activists disguise their project work. Workshops aimed at empowering females are presented as courses in sewing, knitting or first aid.

„What started as a customary behaviour by some organisations who sought permission from armed groups to ensure the safety of their operations and staff has become formalised and taxed by some groups including HTS. The latter has been trying to impose such practices on all organisations. But they are not the only ones who do that, others include Kurdish and pro-regime forces.“¹⁰

The taxation seems to be collected in different ways but the most common one is to give away a cut of the aid to HTS' members and supporters. Multiple sources also pointed out that HTS does not seem to impose the same taxation percentage equally on all groups.

„HTS always attempts to impose *atawat* on organisations distributing aid but the outcome of such attempts depends mostly on how much resistance the group faces. In some cases, the organisations will give in and provide *atawats*, in cash or in kind, to avoid attacks or harassment. But in other cases, some organisations either reject to pay or refuse to increase HTS' percentage and threaten to terminate their services, which forces HTS to give in or escalate depending on the situation.“¹¹

The following account gives an example of the successful strategy of a local humanitarian organisation that wishes to stay anonymous for safety reasons on how to refuse and mobilize against HTS-imposed conditions. The NGO was implementing a relief project in cooperation with the local council in a town in northern Syria. HTS started pressuring the NGO to terminate its cooperation with the council

and implement the project with one of its affiliate charities. The NGO threatened to terminate the project and close its office in the town. The NGO as well as other activists and civil groups used those threats to mobilise locals to protest against HTS and show their support for the NGO and its work. As a result of this community pressure as well as HTS' inability to replace the services provided by the organisation, HTS stopped pressuring the NGO which was able to carry on with its relief efforts as planned.

Contrarily, some local civil society activists have expressed their frustration regarding the lack of will among some humanitarian organisations to stand up to HTS and refuse to pay the taxation.

„I personally blame some humanitarian NGOs, local and international, for encouraging such behaviour. I believe that the situation would have been different if all humanitarian NGOs collectively had agreed not to accept the taxes imposed on them.“¹²

While at least some agree with this opinion, humanitarian actors operating on the ground view this statement as a typical easier-said-than-done situation.

„Firstly, paying some sort of taxes in conflict zones is a common practice. Almost all NGOs in Syria are doing that in one way or another, including the UN agencies who are being blackmailed by the regime. The alternative to that is to either operate in a chaotic and highly dangerous environment where the safety of the staff and the aid is not granted or to terminate all operations.“¹³

There is no simple solution to a situation like this. Nonetheless, it seems that the first step is to start a debate among all humanitarian actors operating in areas where HTS has a presence in order to explore possible options and find ways to collectively implement a strategy.

Notably, similar taxations are not applied to groups providing non-food items such as medical services because they usually do not have the money to cover such expenses and their services are urgently required. However, some activists highlighted that HTS has become stricter about issuing written approval to humanitarian organisations, which requires the disclosure of the names of their donors and the objectives of their work, before allowing them to embark on any work.¹⁴

Restrictions on non-humanitarian organisations

The situation is different when it comes to organisations providing non-humanitarian services such as education, community mobilisation or human rights work. Although HTS is not in favour of such activities, the group does not seem to completely forbid them. Unlike with humanitarian organisations, HTS does not seem to impose special registration procedures on civil society organisations which allow them to operate, at least in areas where the group does not have full control.¹⁵ However, such activities are only tolerated under strict conditions and are subject to close monitoring. The imposed restrictions include sex segregation, dressing and behaving according to the Sharia code and also dictate: no music or tempting pictures and no work that, explicitly or implicitly,

03 NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE STRATEGIES AGAINST HAYAT TAHRIR AL-SHAM

might be considered a threat to HTS' interests or influence. For example, in the field of education, HTS monitors, through informants or random inspections, the curriculum, the appearance of the teachers and class activities to make sure that no violations are committed. The groups conducting activities that are not permitted by HTS (gender equality, promoting democracy and human rights etc.) usually disguise their activities under different names and purposes. For example, many workshops aimed at empowering females might be given innocuous titles: sewing, first aid, knitting etc., which makes them appear less threatening.

„Working in areas controlled by HTS is similar to working in regime-held areas. It is risky, but you can still work there as long as they do not know about your work. Therefore, strict secrecy, online and offline, is crucial. I have been providing capacity building training on civic education and human rights for many years now without problems. The number of female beneficiaries who attend my training sessions is even higher than the number of male ones. This is something I am not allowed to do as a male according to HTS due to the imposed sex segregation which prevents men from mingling with or training females.“¹⁶

Thus, the impact of the restrictions imposed by HTS on civil society work depends largely on how influential HTS is in the respective area, the type of work and the local support for such groups or activities. But there is a general impression among the interviewees that civil society work can largely be carried

out without major interference in areas where HTS is present as long as basic security and safety measures are carefully implemented.

In areas where HTS has limited influence, the work of civil society groups is generally easier due to the limited presence of HTS members or supporters. HTS' intervention in these areas depends mainly on how much community support it has versus how popular the organisations are as well as the popularity and power of local governing bodies and rebel groups. For example, in the city of Atarib in rural Aleppo, HTS does not have much authority over civil organisations due to the strength of the local community and its strong relationships with local armed groups, civil society and governing entities. Under such circumstances, CSOs have more freedom to operate in those areas without being concerned with what HTS thinks about them or their activities. But groups that operate not only in Atarib but also in areas dominated by HTS have to take into consideration the impact of their activities on their work in these areas.

„We only operate in Atarib so we do not hide our hatred towards HTS or the activities we do to resist it such as demonstrations etc. But other groups who operate in Sahara for example [a village next to Atarib where HTS has more influence] only participate discreetly in anti-HTS activities such as helping to build up an anti-HTS organisation without participating in it, or writing anti-HTS slogans on walls etc.“¹⁷

Such activities should be accepted and protected by local communities and groups. They should also not be viewed as anti-Sharia or anti-religious – attributes which are commonly used by HTS as excuses to justify its attacks against CSOs, even in areas where they do not have full dominance. For example, HTS (called Jabhat al-Nusra at the time) stormed the Radio Fresh FM station run by local activists in the town of Kafranbel in January 2016 although they only had limited presence inside the town. HTS confiscated electronics, wiped the building clean of activist materials and arrested Raed Fares, the manager of the station, under the pretext of broadcasting immoral programs using women announcers and music, claiming it is haram (an act forbidden under Islam).¹⁸ Activists, nonetheless, pointed out that HTS, unlike ISIS, does not usually assassinate activists who work against it.

„We do not fear HTS or Nusra the same way we used to fear ISIS. They do not execute activists who oppose them. HTS usually storms centers, confiscates equipment, arrests activists – but those people usually get released as a result of community pressure.“¹⁹

And yet, other activists have previously accused HTS of assassinating activists²⁰ and kidnapping others.²¹ These incidents, however, are uncommon and usually lack solid evidence.

¹⁶ Author interview via Skype with Mustafa, a freelance trainer focusing on peace building, 19 July 2017.

¹⁷ Author interview via Skype with Ibrahim, a relief worker, 3 October 2017.

¹⁸ DW. (2016). 'The Release of Prominent Activists Detained by Al-Nusra', DW, 1 October 2016, <http://p.dw.com/p/1Hb38> (accessed 27 Aug. 2017).

¹⁹ Author interview via Skype with Ahmed, a media activist, 7 July 2017.

²⁰ Haid, H. (2016), 'Did Jabhat al-Nusra Assassinate Syrian Activist Khaled al-Issa?', Now Lebanon, 29 June 2016, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/567144-did-jabhat-al-nusra-assassinate-syrian-activist-khaled-al-issa> (accessed 18 Sep. 2016).

²¹ al-Halabi, L. (2015), 'Is al-Nusra Involved in the Kidnapping of Maher Karman in Aleppo?', Enab Baladi, 29 November 2015, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/54220> (accessed 6 Sep. 2017).

Nonetheless, the overarching aim of those protests is to show HTS that they cannot control locals who continue to act as they please.

Most of the nonviolent resistance tactics used against both the Syrian regime and ISIS (such as demonstrations, graffiti, satire etc.) have also been used against HTS. Nonetheless, it seems that there are differences in the way these were mastered as well as the level of brutality that they were faced with

„The nonviolent tactics used against HTS were better planned and more frequently used than those used against Daesh. This is because the former did not target activists or terrorise communities the same way Daesh did. We have also learned a lot from the mistakes we made and the tactics we used against both Assad and Daesh. It was sort of an on-the-job training which has prepared us to face HTS and has provided us with more tools to ensure our safety.“²²

Public protests as a means of resistance

Organising demonstrations and public events seems to be the most popular nonviolent tactic used

against HTS. The majority of the demonstrations are still directed against the Syrian regime, but the protesters also voice their support for the Free Syrian Army and the civil rights demands and principles of the revolution, which are both opposed to by HTS. Nonetheless, the overarching aim of those protests is to show HTS that they cannot control locals who continue to act as they please. The second aim is to irritate the group and push it to make mistakes. Activists also sing and dance during the demonstrations, but it seems that HTS, which oppresses such activities, seems to be more upset with the flag and the slogans used than anything else.

Locals generally feel that it is easier to organise demonstrations now more than before, under the control of both ISIS and Assad, especially in areas where the former is not the dominant force.

„We usually try to take advantage of any occasion to organise demonstrations. Sometimes we celebrate important dates or events such as

the anniversary of the revolution. But we also try to rally people in protests against HTS violations such as when they attack another group or try to expand their influence.“²³

Protests are usually organised either through small meetings where activists meet in person or through private group messages via social media like Facebook or chatting applications on smartphones like WhatsApp. The discussions usually focus on deciding the reason for the demonstration in order to choose the appropriate slogans for the event. Tasks are then distributed based on people's capacity and availability. Most of the demonstrations usually follow Friday prayers, which makes it easier to mobilise the big number of people already in the public space. Notably, many activists mentioned that HTS does not attack or disperse demonstrations. The group usually does not even suppress the protests against it, especially in areas where it has limited influence.

²² Author interview via Skype with Mustafa, a freelance trainer focusing on peace building, 19 July 2017.

²³ Author interview via Skype with Mohammed, the coordinator of 24CR, a civil resistance group against extremism, 18 July 2017.



ACTIVISTS DISSEMINATE THE REVOLUTION FLAG IN THEIR CITY. THE CIVIL SOCIETY CENTER IN ATARIB, A PROJECT SUPPORTED BY ADOPT A REVOLUTION, IS ALWAYS FIRST IN ORGANIZING CIVILIAN RESISTANCE TO HTS.

„We do not fear HTS or Nusra the same way we used to fear ISIS.“

AHMED, MEDIA ACTIVIST



WOMEN SPRAYING THE NAME OF THE JIHADIST LEADER 'AL-JOLANI' ON PUBLIC BINS TO HUMILIATE HIM. MAARAT AL-NU'MAN, JUNE 2017.

„HTS does not usually attack such demonstrations due to concerns about the consequences of such actions which could lead to direct confrontations with local communities. The group is smart enough to know that any struggle with local communities is a lost battle. Such fights cannot be won by military means.“²⁴

Others believe that HTS does not attack such protests because they do not pose a serious threat to the group's authority or influence. Nonetheless, HTS on some occasions has attacked protesters simply for carrying the revolutionary flag²⁵ or for demonstrating against HTS' attempt to take over their cities, as seen in Maarat al-Nu'man²⁶ and Saraqib²⁷ in the Idlib province.

Visual Resistance: Contesting Public Space

The power struggle to control cities is also a passive war of logos and slogans which takes place in the background to achieve a symbolic and visual supremacy. Such a figurative struggle usually starts with groups like HTS and ISIS trying to spread their logos, flags, name and slogans in all public spaces as well as erasing any symbol they disapprove of.

„Do not ever underestimate the power of symbols in projecting power. When you only see one

logo all over the place you unconsciously start assuming the dominance of that group. The aim of such a tactic is not only targeted towards locals who live in the area but also towards passers-by who will only take away what they can see in the streets.“²⁸

To fight such a war, local activists use less risky tactics such as graffiti. It is the most popular means as it is cheap, quick, easy to use and can even be carried out by only one person. Some of these activities aim to limit the visual dominance of HTS by spraying the revolutionary flag all over the city, while others challenge HTS' ideology by spraying slogans that embrace human rights, the importance of being active citizens (encouraging participation in local elections) and gender equality (using slogans such as “educating a girl educates a family”). Moreover, some graffiti slogans are more aggressive and directly target HTS and its leaders. One example is the spraying of the name of Abu Mohammed al-Julani, the main figure within HTS, on trash bins to insult him²⁹ or insult the group in general.³⁰ Other slogans call for the toppling of HTS.³¹

The impact of such tactics, however, is contested among activists as some of them think that such activities are useful to encourage people to speak up and resist HTS even though such

an impact may need a long time. Others think that although local communities might not be that affected by such tactics, such graffiti still bothers HTS' members to the point where they strive to erase it immediately. Therefore, continuing to spray the slogans will continue to send the message that locals are resisting them.³²

Satire as a means of undermining HTS' legitimacy

Satire is also one of the main tools that activists have at their disposal to resist HTS and undermine its legitimacy. Humour allows resisters to manipulate doubts and cognitive incongruities, enabling them to undermine an oppressor in a manner that is less confrontational than other tactics like protests and even less risky than graffiti. Many activists argue that people are generally terrorized into submission. Therefore, satire is important to lower fear barriers by combining humour with verified reporting about the group's hypocrisy, absurdity and violations to poke holes in HTS' claims to authority.

„Humour is a powerful weapon. Radical groups and dictators rule through fear. But we can overcome that fear barrier by making fun of them. It is very simple: people are not scared of what they can make fun of.“³³

„Do not ever underestimate the power of symbols in projecting power.“

MUSTAFA, PEACE ACTIVIST

²⁴ Author interview via Skype with Kareem, a human rights educator, 15 July 2017.

²⁵ al-Modon. (2016), 'Al-Nusra Transfers the Detainees from Idlib's Demonstration to Maarat al-Numan', al-Modon, 8 March 2016, <http://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2016/3/8/> (accessed 6 Aug. 2017).

²⁶ Al-Hajaj, S. (2017), 'HTS Opens Fire at Protestors after Storming Maarat al-Numan', ARA News, 9 June 2017, <http://wp.me/p40hLR-pXj> (accessed 6 July 2017).

²⁷ SOHR. (2017), 'The Fighting Continues in Idlib and HTS Attempts to Capture Bab al-Hawa', SOHR, 21 July 2017, <http://www.syriahr.com/2017/07/21/> (accessed 12 Aug. 2017).

²⁸ Author interview via Skype with Mustafa, a freelance trainer focusing on peace building, 19 July 2017.

²⁹ Jabhat Al-Nusra Violations Documentation Team (2017), 'The Best Place for the Names of Jolani and Bashar al-Assad in Syria', on Twitter, 28 August 2017, https://twitter.com/JAN_Violations/status/902172708414394368 (accessed 3 Sep. 2017).

³⁰ Jabhat Al-Nusra Violations Documentation Team (2017), 'Fuck HTS', on Twitter, 11 June 2017, https://twitter.com/JAN_Violations/status/873964761528119298 (accessed 3 Sep. 2017).

³¹ Ali Hassan Satoof (2017), 'Down with HTS', on Twitter, 27 July 2017, <https://twitter.com/alihassansatoof/status/890667021800620032> (accessed 3 Sep. 2017).

³² Author interview via Skype with Mohammed, the coordinator of 24CR, a civil resistance group against extremism, 18 July 2017.

³³ Author interview via Skype with activist Fares, a coordinator for a group focusing on building the capacity of local institutions, 10 July 2017.

³⁴ Dioub, A. (2016), 'Jabhat Fateh al-Sham is Jabhat al-Nusra', al-Araby, 7 August 2016, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/2016/8/6> (accessed 4 Sep. 2017).

³⁵ Al-Atarib al-Shahida. (2017), Profile Picture, Facebook, 21 July 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/atarebmartyr/photos> (accessed 4 Sep. 2017).

³⁶ Author interview via Skype with Mohammed, the coordinator of 24CR, a civil resistance group against extremism, 18 July 2017.

³⁷ Author interview via Skype with Ibrahim, a relief worker, 3 October 2017.

³⁸ Women have been able to play different roles in resisting radical groups, such as HTS and ISIS, namely by hindering child recruitment by such groups, organizing demonstrations etc. For further reading: Razan Ghazawi, Oula Ramadan and Afra Mohammad. (2015), 'Peace Defines Our Future', Badael, 2015, <http://badael.org/en/women-research-2/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2017).

Activists have focused on mocking HTS and its practices by taking photos from HTS propaganda videos or statements and adding sarcastic comments to them. For example, in one caricature, the artist makes fun of HTS' (called Jabhat al-Nusra at the time) claim that it cut ties with al-Qaeda by drawing a typical Salafi looking person using a makeup box branded al-Qaeda to make over their appearance.³⁴ Additionally, other groups have tried to show the similarities in the violations committed by both Assad and HTS³⁵ through drawings indicating that they are two faces of the same coin.

Social media, which facilitates the quick dissemination of information across geographical barriers, has also played a role in disseminating such satirical outputs on a wider scale, even to areas under HTS' heavy handed rule.

„Syrians love to share audio-visual outputs. They might even send you ten pictures to say good morning. Thus, we try to use that to our advantage by creating audio-visual satirical outputs so people can watch and share them“³⁶

Flaws in the applied peaceful approaches

Despite the ability of Syrian organisations to clearly show their resistance to HTS, most of their actions have limited direct impact on challenging HTS' dominance on the ground. Most of these actions are usually carried out on an ad-hoc basis without a clear strategy or milestones that could help assess their successes and failures. Additionally, most of the groups resisting HTS work either individually or in small-scale alliances but still fail to rally their allies or potential partners to coordinate and support each other's actions.

„When a group starts a campaign, the campaign is mostly done and promoted by the members of the group without any clear contribution from other groups or organisations who agree with the objective of the campaign and, therefore, could be potential partners.“³⁷

Competition over funds, personal differences, security risks, ideological differences, lack of interest, different priorities etc. are among the reasons that prevent such actors from being able to unify their efforts against HTS. Likewise, most of the resistance actions against HTS, namely demonstrations, are limited to a small number of activists without wide community participation, unless something

„People are not scared of what they can make fun of“

FARES, ACTIVIST



RESIDENTS OF MAARAT AL-NU'MAN DEMONSTRATE IN FEBRUARY 2017: 'NO PLACE FOR AL-QAIDA IN SYRIA'

04 USING GOVERNANCE AND SERVICES AS TOOLS OF RESISTANCE

HTS' approach to controlling territories does not only depend on military means. Contrarily, the group has, for years, been using a gradual approach to gain local sympathy and buy-in, through which it can further expand its influence, ideology, and, eventually, control. To this end, HTS uses the provision of public services to generate community support and recruit members. Providing services may also weaken its competitors and fast-track the dissemination of its ideology. Furthermore, if community members receive services from HTS, they may be more willing to accept the organisation's coercive methods of spreading its beliefs. The group's lack of resources and capacity limits its ability to gain a monopoly over services in areas under its control. As a result, the group has managed to maximize impact by carefully providing the most needed services (such as water, electricity and sometimes bread etc.), which generates both legitimacy and income as such

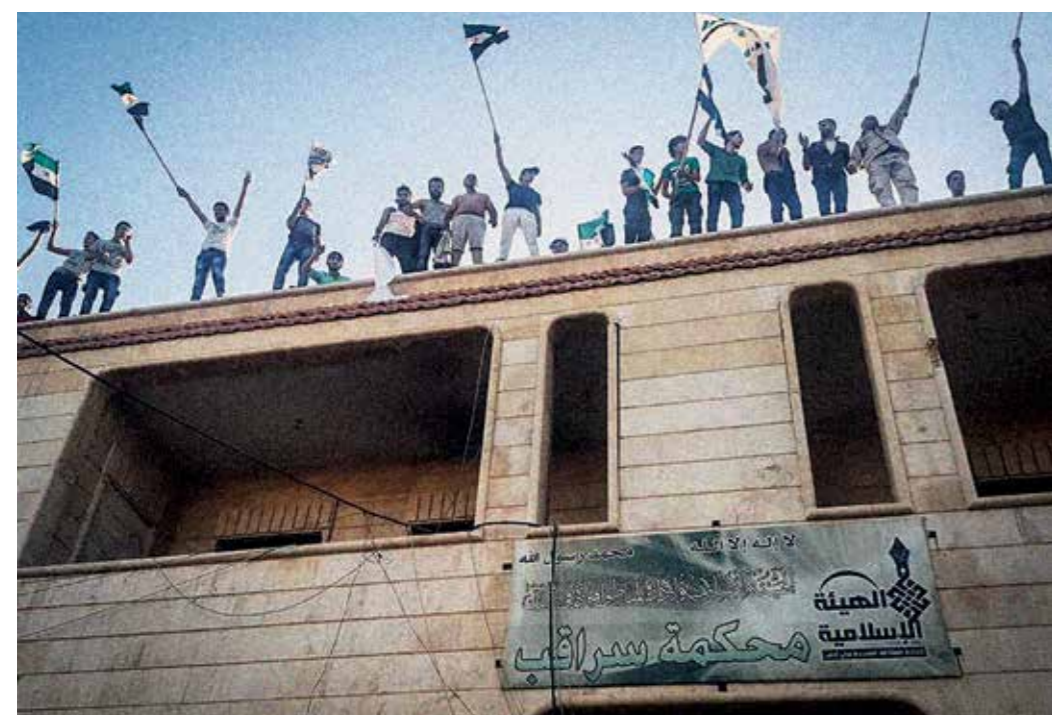
services are usually chargeable. But recently, HTS has started to diversify its services as more resources have become available and such services provisions help it establish full control over the territories it holds.

Controlling local institutions and service provision

Additionally, HTS has also increasingly prioritized tightening its control over governance institutions and service provision bodies (such as local councils, courts, police, bakeries etc.). This tactic aims to generate sufficient public backing in order to take administrative control of the area as a whole. To achieve that, the group promotes itself as the most competent governing body by drawing attention to the inefficiencies in locally run governing bodies. HTS then seeks to disband these institutions by presenting the local population with alternatives to replace those it attacks.

In other cases, the group uses a different, 'carrot-and-stick' approach which was successful in some areas while it led to a series of skirmishes with locals in others. For example, HTS (Fateh al-Sham at the time) stormed the police station in Kaf-ranbel in July 2015 and arrested its staff who were accused of being corrupt.³⁹ Locals, however, stated that even though some policemen are viewed locally as corrupt, the main reason for HTS' operation is related to the fact that the group had opened a HTS affiliated police station in the town two months earlier. But because locals were not using the HTS-affiliate station, the group used the above mentioned accusation to shut down the only competing police station.⁴⁰ Similarly, HTS arrested the head of the local council in Sinjar, in the Idlib province, in January 2017 after he refused to hand over the official stamps of the council to the new council established by HTS (Fateh al-Sham at the time).⁴¹

HTS has also increasingly prioritized tightening its control over governance institutions and service provision bodies (such as local councils, courts, police, bakeries etc.).



IN JULY 2017, ACTIVISTS DEMONSTRATE IN SARAQEB AGAINST AN ATTACK OF HTS BY OCCUPYING THE LOCAL SHARIA COURT

³⁹ It is worth noting that HTS has used this tactic to also eliminate rebel groups such as the Syrian Revolutionaries Front and Hazem movement etc.

⁴⁰ Author interview via Skype with Sami, a relief worker, 25 July 2017.

⁴¹ Abdulfatah, O. (2017), 'Fateh al-Sham Arrested the Head of Local Council in Sinjar, Idlib', Smart News, 3 January 2017, <https://smartnews-agency.com/ar/wires/215558> (accessed 4 Sep. 2017).

⁴² Author interview via Skype with activist Ammar, a community mobiliser, 4 October 2017.

⁴³ Bareesh, M. (2017), 'Saraqib's Local Elections Show How Democracy Can Break Through in Syria', Chatham House, August 2017, <https://syria.chatham-house.org/research/saraqibs-local-elections-show-how-democracy-can-break-through-in-syria> (accessed 3 Sep. 2017).

⁴⁴ Author interview via Skype with activist Ammar, a community mobiliser, 4 October 2017.



GOOD GOVERNANCE INHIBITS THE SUCCESS OF JIHADISTS. THE CIVIL CENTER IN ATARIB, SUPPORTED BY ADOPT A REVOLUTION, RUNS A JOINT CAMPAIGN WITH THE LOCAL COUNCIL AGAINST CARRYING WEAPONS IN PUBLIC

To counter HTS' attempts, local civil society organisations and activists contribute to increasing the efficiency and legitimacy of local institutions to make them hard to replace. Improving communication channels with local communities is one of the most popular tactics. This is usually done through organising regular public meetings with locals where officials from different institutions (namely police and local councils) present their work and discuss how to improve their services as well as the involvement of locals.

To counter HTS' attempts, local civil society organisations and activists contribute to increasing the efficiency and legitimacy of local institutions to make them hard to replace.

„The aim of such meetings is to inform locals about the services provided as many people do not really know who is doing what. This also helps people understand what the priorities of such institutions are and why. Finally, it makes local officials approachable, which is a new concept to us, and it allows them to shape local policies.“⁴²

Building the capacity of local governing bodies and providing them with logistical and technical support is also a common approach. Some organisations make their centres and equipment available to be

used by local governing bodies for different purposes such as organising training, calling for a meeting or other social activities. Other CSOs provide those governing entities with more advanced support such as assisting them in writing their proposals, monitoring and reporting their projects and expanding their outreach on social media with special emphasis on sharing information about their activities. Additionally, others help those entities increase their popularity by becoming more transparent and encouraging them to organise direct elections, like in the case of the local elections Saraqib.⁴³

Only strong and popular local governing bodies will be able to challenge HTS' attempts to replace them with HTS-affiliated bodies. Therefore, and also due to their ability to use services as recruiting tools, HTS views local councils as its main governing competitors. However, the group's relationships with those councils varies by time and place, is contingent on available resources, the strength and popularity of local civil society and governing bodies and the presence of armed groups that support and

protect those entities. In some areas, HTS tries to gain influence over local councils by providing needed support or services (such as electricity and water). In exchange, the group might either ask for money, logistical support, more control or official presence. Such approaches are usually implemented in areas where local communities are hostile towards or unsupportive of HTS. For example, when the local bakery in Atarib was struggling financially, the group tried to offer to provide bread at cheaper prices in exchange for running the bakery. But local activists and civil society groups were able to prevent this by assisting in looking for donors who were willing to contribute financially to the bakery.⁴⁴

Controlling local councils

In other cases, HTS tries to infiltrate local councils in order to control or contain them. This usually happens by imposing candidates on the council or by using its resources and connections to gain control. This usually takes place in areas where HTS has limited influence or where it does not have the resources to control administrative bodies that provide local services. Local activists have been trying to also use their connections to counter this by either pressuring the imposed person to withdraw or by creating enough community pressure to block their appointment – yet with limited success.

„It is not always possible to stop such attempts, especially if HTS has enough influence to enforce them, either by utilising its services and resources to persuade people into accepting it or when the local council is ineffective.“⁴⁵

Additionally, the group at times also replaces local councils with its own structures. This mostly applies to areas where HTS exercises

complete control. In such cases, local organisations try to undermine those HTS-affiliated entities by pointing out their mistakes and incompetence in order to turn people against them. However, such attempts are rarely effective and take a long time to be fruitful, especially after the establishment of HTS' Public Services Administration which is more assertive in replacing the councils that do not accept its affiliation.⁴⁶

Controlling local courts

HTS also competes with locals to control courts as they allow it to mainstream its ultra-conservative beliefs and shape societal norms in the long-term. Additionally, they permit it to act with impunity by exploiting religious ideology to justify unpopular actions, such as commandeering public goods or property, or those of its competitors. Local courts affiliated with local governing bodies are usually known to be ineffective and lack the needed power to enforce their decisions. While HTS' Sharia courts are one of its most salient tools, the group always ensures that

its affiliated courts are effective by endowing each with an executive security force to enforce its rulings. As a result, HTS-affiliated courts are usually compared favourably with those of its rivals.

„The problem is not incompetent judges, but the ability to enforce their rulings, which do make those courts unattractive to many locals. The local police force is either powerless or corrupt which makes such a task even harder.“⁴⁷

But the existence of strong and locally supported governing bodies has prevented HTS from controlling all courts and from imposing a monopoly on the juridical system in rebel-held areas.

„HTS, and before that Daesh, has been trying to control our local court [in Atarib] for years. Yet, the strong local community and the joint efforts of all local governing bodies have prevented it from achieving that in our city, but it has largely succeeded in other areas.“⁴⁸

„The problem is not incompetent judges, but the ability to enforce their rulings, which do make those courts unattractive to many locals“

WALEED, ACTIVIST

⁴⁹ Guadagnoli, G. (Ed.) (2017), 'Women Participation in Syrian Cities Today', EU, July 2017, https://docs.euromedwomen.foundation/files/ermwf-documents/7096_3.180.women-participationinsyriancitiestoday-emergingrolesandopportunities.pdf (accessed 5 Aug. 2017).

Further need for strengthened local structures

However, given the limited means and resources of local communities, it is important to highlight that the sustainable support of other local and international actors (such as the interim government, rebel groups, donors etc.) is needed to improve the administrative structures' efficiency.

The case of Saraqib illustrates the limits of local civil society's ability to protect its local institutions from a HTS take over. Following local elections in Saraqib, the city was captured through military force by HTS after defeating Ahrar al-Sham fighters there. Nonetheless, locals were demonstrating in the streets against HTS and were able to push the group's fighters outside the city. As a result, HTS started besieging the city by establishing checkpoints around it, but was still unable to establish a strong presence inside Saraqib. As for the local council, HTS has been able to dominate some of the council's service provision functions (such as electricity, water and phones). Despite that, HTS has not been able to dominate the rest of the council or its decisions. As a result, views are divided between those who think that the council has failed to prevent HTS' dominance while others view this as a partial success as the council is still able to challenge HTS' attempt to fully control the council.

Furthermore, local civil society organisations are focusing on resisting HTS in the areas where they operate. In doing so, they rarely reach out to other organisations resisting HTS in other areas to share lessons learned and support their struggle against the common enemy. Consequently, HTS attempts to control areas where there is no strong civil society, as it remains relatively unchallenged. Besides, Syrian organisations still generally ignore the role that Syrian women can play to support such tactics, which contributes to enforcing the traditional perception that limits the public role of women to charity aid and medical care. Likewise, Syrian organisations still generally view the role of women organisations as a complement to governing institutions rather than a part of them. Women organisations, as such, are expected to provide complementary services (such as vocational training, aid etc.) without being directly involved in running such institutions or shaping their policies.⁴⁹



VIEW OF ATARIB: A STABLE LOCAL ADMINISTRATION AND A STRONG LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY MAKE THE CITY A BULWARK AGAINST HTS

⁴⁵ Author interview via Skype with Ahmed, a media activist, 7 July 2017.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Author interview via Skype with activist Waleed, a team leader for a group supporting local governance, 3 July 2017.

⁴⁸ Author interview via Skype with activist Ammar, a community mobiliser, 4 October 2017.

„We aim to empower local citizens to become aware of their rights so as to be ready to defend themselves.“

MOHAMMED, ACTIVIST

05 THE ROLE OF PEACEFUL RESISTANCE IN THE CONTEXT OF ARMED CONFRONTATIONS WITH HTS



'SUSPENDED BY JABHAT AL-NUSRA' IS WRITTEN ON THIS WALL TO INDICATE THE SHUTDOWN OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVES IN KAFRANBEL THAT OPERATED BEHIND THIS WALL BEFORE JANUARY 2016. THE ALLEGATION BROUGHT FORWARD BY HTS AGAINST THE ORGANISATIONS WAS: DISRESPECT OF THE SHARIA.

Most organisations' work to create and empower local resistance to radical groups like HTS takes place before direct confrontations with the latter. Efforts at raising awareness about the importance of resisting HTS and mobilising people to act against HTS take a long time before they start paying off. Such efforts aim at creating enough resistance among local communities to create grassroots rebellions. These are then expected to challenge and revolt against any radical group attempting to control them. But such a process depends mainly on the snowball effect. The impact of these efforts usually starts off small and insignificant, but their continuity over a long time allows it to grow bigger and develop crucial influence.

„We cannot be everywhere to react to all HTS' violations and expansion attempts. Therefore, we aim to empower local citizens to become aware of their rights so as

to be ready to defend themselves. Once that level is reached, our role then focuses on maintaining and guiding it.“⁵⁰

Leaderless movements as a tactic of resistance

Nonetheless, the role of civil society groups does not end there, as many of them continue to play an important role even during direct confrontations, although not collectively under the banner of civil society groups. Instead, local activists perform roles as individuals benefiting from their local affiliations (such as their extended family, personal relationships with local armed groups etc.), which can provide them with protection. Many activists stressed the importance of guiding and influencing direct confrontations with HTS from behind the scenes.

Such a move helps create a leaderless movement, which makes it difficult for HTS to target and eliminate the mobilisers of their enemies.

„Locals have demonstrated regularly against HTS in Maarat al-Nu'man for more than three months. But until now, no one really knows who the leaders of those demonstrations are. This is one of the reasons that prevented HTS from crushing them.“⁵¹

This tactic also helps to overcome the negative consequences that might result from tensions and competition among locals. Some activists expressed their concern that if a certain person or organisation calls for or leads such confrontations, then at least some people, and sometimes their extended families, will not join just because they do not like the person or the entity. Some might even join the other team and mobilise other members to join them, which has appa-

„But until now, no one really knows who the leaders of those demonstrations are. This is one of the reasons that prevented HTS from crushing them.“

MUSTAFA, ACTIVIST

50 Author interview via Skype with Mohammed, the coordinator of 24CR, a civil resistance group against extremism, 18 July 2017.

51 Author interview via Skype with Mustafa, a freelance trainer focusing on peace building, 19 July 2017.

52 Author interview via Skype with activist Mosaab, a field coordinator working with a group focusing on conflict resolution, 20 July 2017.

53 Ibid.

54 Haid, H. (2017), 'Why Ahrar al-Sham Couldn't Stand up to HTS' Attack in Idlib', Chatham House, August 2017, <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/why-ahrar-al-sham-couldnt-stand-up-to-hts-attack-in-idlib> (accessed 5 Sep. 2017).

55 Author interview via Skype with activist Ammar, a community mobiliser, 4 October 2017.

56 Atareb Syriafree (2015), 'Public Statement by Atarib's Civilians, Notables and Military Leaders about the Regiment 46 Base', YouTube, 27 February 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ldcsxjq6KM> (accessed 10 Sep. 2016).

57 Haid, H. (2017), 'Local Community Resistance to Extremist Groups in Syria: Lessons from Atarib', Chatham House, June 2017, <https://www.chatham-house.org/publication/local-community-resistance-extremist-groups-syria-lessons-atarib> (accessed 21 July 2017).

58 Ibid.

In Atarib, local communities frequently protested in the streets and prevented HTS' attempts to control the city.

rently happened in some cases.⁵² Additionally, avoiding the use of the names of the supporting organisations also makes it difficult for HTS to arrest their members under the pretext of dealing with foreign entities or promoting their agendas. As a result, HTS has to be more sensitive to local dynamics and pay more attention to the consequences of arresting someone as their extended family and the armed group or groups that their relatives are members of might retaliate, which has happened on many occasions.⁵³

Undermining HTS' logic of violence

Countering the discourse of HTS and finding holes in their justifications is usually one of the most important roles at this stage. Before or during any attack, HTS always cites pretexts to justify attacking its enemies, which vary from corruption to defying the Sharia or working for foreign entities. The aim of such ploys is to mobilise the group's supporters and neutralise the others. In contrast to the other rebel groups, HTS has long-held experience in manipulating local communities and factions to make them focus on their short-term survival and ignore the consequences. This has become easier due to the localized nature of the Syrian conflict. It significantly shapes the way local communities and factions perceive themselves and their interests, which in turn has limited them largely to their own towns or villages.⁵⁴

Therefore, local activists try to counter such discourses by pointing out HTS' real intentions and providing evidence pertaining to its violations and pretexts. Local activists also try to show the aims and tricks of HTS' strategy.

„We always try to explain to people that HTS only wants to control local institutions and governing

bodies in order to control the area without improving anything. To this end, we compare the situation in our areas to the situation in HTS' areas and show that things did not change there“⁵⁵

Additionally, warning messages are communicated about the negative consequences of allowing HTS to control such bodies, such as that donors will be driven out of the region.

The success of joint mobilization and alliance building

Such efforts have mobilised local communities in many areas such as Atarib to protest in the streets. This has prevented HTS' attempt to control the city both in March 2015 and more recently in July 2017 when the group tried to dominate the city and its institutions, such as the police headquarters, local court and services provision entities. In response to HTS' takeover attempts, the local population rose up in opposition despite the unwillingness of the majority of local armed groups to enter into a conflict against HTS. The city's community leaders, activists, notables and a small group of local military leaders unanimously agreed that all actions would be taken to prevent HTS from capturing the city.⁵⁶ Following that meeting, activists as well as the city's notables used different communication channels (such as social media, mobile chatting applications, mosques etc.) to urge members of local armed groups and civilians to participate in the defence of Atarib.⁵⁷ Soon after, activists started helping locals in establishing checkpoints across the city. Others used social media to establish a two-way communication channel to keep people updated and to receive notice of and report any violations or attacks. The same channels were also used to organize demonstrations in which local activists were

mainly the ones in charge of writing the slogans against HTS as well as broadcasting them. Additionally, groups were established to distribute food and water to checkpoints. Although the situation did not escalate into a direct confrontation with HTS in both cases, locals were able to protect their city from a takeover by HTS.

But despite the desire of Syrian organisations to play an active role in the context of direct confrontations against HTS, their efforts are secondary in this context as military leaders, elders and other community figures play key roles in such situations.⁵⁸

06 CONCLUSION: APPLYING LESSONS LEARNED

Following HTS' military victory against the powerful Ahrar al-Sham group, it is now apparent that the former is taking an ever more assertive line on the ground, not only in its drive to absorb the remaining armed factions, but also in its relationships with local governance structures and civil society groups. Following the establishment of the militia's 'Civil Administration for Services', the group issued a series of decisions on the work of local councils and service providers, demanding that they submit periodic reports on their work, activities and services, as well as submitting financial reports, and revealing their donors.⁵⁹ These dynamics seem to continue despite the Turkish-led intervention in Idlib, which allegedly aims at limiting HTS' influence.⁶⁰

Many local councils and organisations have resisted HTS' recent attempts to dominate them, due primarily to ideological differences and distrust. Moreover, they are aware of the fact that dealing with the group's affiliated administration would directly link them to a listed terrorist organization and could terminate the international support they receive. This triggered a conflict between HTS and civil groups⁶¹, as the latter insisted on operating independently of any armed groups. The international support channelled to Syrian organisations plays a key role in providing them with the funds and technical support needed to be able to challenge HTS. But instead of supporting such local civil resistance movements, the international community is debating whether and when to terminate assistance channelled to civil society groups in northern Syria. Such a move, if it is to be implemented, will result in forcing many humanitarian actors

to curtail their operations to support local vulnerable communities who live in miserable circumstances and therefore rely completely on those actors. Terminating development aid will not only give HTS a chance to achieve its goal of forming affiliated councils and service providers; it will also prevent all civil society groups challenging the group's authority from continuing their important work.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution considering the complicated dynamics on the ground, as some areas are completely run by HTS and its affiliated councils, while other areas foster local resistance towards the group. However, the international community could play a positive role in supporting locals in their struggle against HTS' attempt to impose itself as a civil administration. Such a role should focus on fostering and empowering independent civil organizations and local governing bodies to ensure that their work continues to undermine crucial local support for HTS.

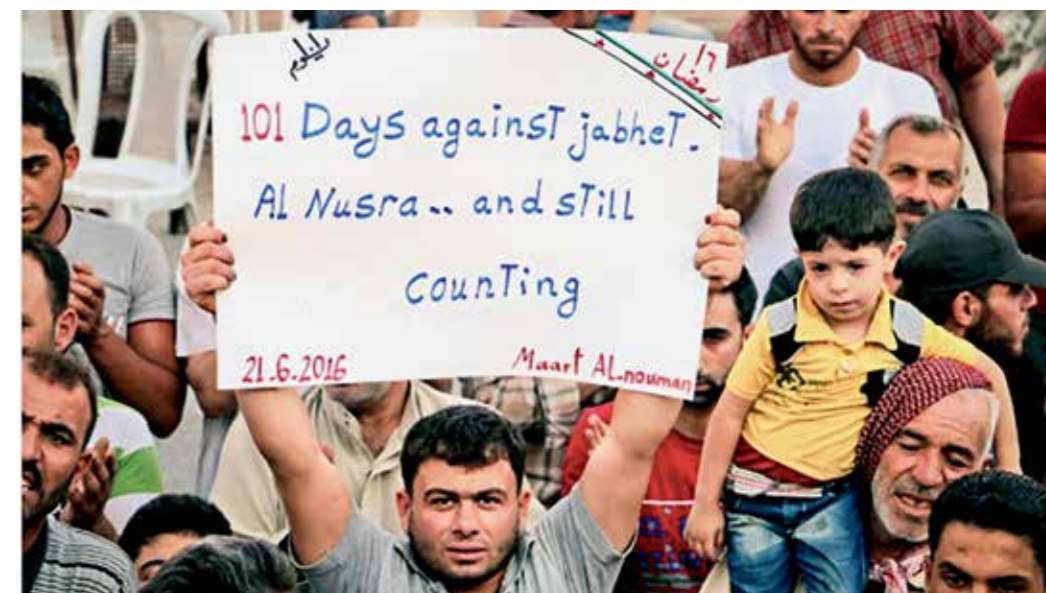
Therefore, it is important to pay special attention to the enabling factors that allow particular civil groups to be more successful than others. The existence of a functioning governance apparatus and reliable services is a key factor in preventing HTS from exploiting such domains as recruiting tools. Thus, it is central to improve the structure, the popularity and efficiency of such governing bodies by increasing their contact with local communities and allowing the latter to enhance their participation in shaping and monitoring the policies and projects of the former. The international community should also provide them

with the needed support, so as to ensure such entities do not have to negotiate or cooperate with HTS to be able to provide basic services to their constituents. Such support includes tailored technical help on good governance, public sector management, taxes, transparency etc. Similarly, it is important to invest in documenting and sharing learned lessons among Syrian organisations and to support them in developing multi-area strategies to widen the focus and the impact of their resistance against HTS.

⁵⁹ Shaam Network (2017), 'HTS' Civilian Administration Issues a Number of Laws to Marginalise the Work of Civil Society Groups in the North ...', Shaam Network, 21 August 2017, <http://www.shaam.org/news/syria-news> (accessed 21 Sep. 2017).

⁶⁰ Akkad, D. (2017), 'Turkey's Idlib Adventure a Last Gasp Bid to Secure Influence', Middle East Eye, 10 October 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/analysis-turkeys-idlib-intervention-last-gasp-effort-581281412> (accessed 10 Oct. 2017).

⁶¹ Local councils, starting with Idlib city council, began issuing official statements responding to the formation of the new administration. The city council's statement said the directives were an attempt to subjugate the council's agencies and were totally unacceptable. Shortly after, a statement was released by Maarat al-Nu'man council, saying that it was not subordinate to any group. Jarjaz council also issued a statement saying it came under the authority of Idlib provincial council, which in turn is under the control of the Syrian provisional government, and that the council would not follow any new authority, a reference to the administration.



FOR MONTHS ACTIVISTS HAD PROTESTED IN MAARAT AL-NU'MAN THROUGHOUT 2016 AGAINST THE JIHADISTS OF HTS (BACK THEN: AL-NUSRA FRONT)

Civil society groups that are rooted in their communities are stronger and better protected against HTS' threats and encroachment. Hence, it is vital to allow Syrian civil society and governance organisations to set their own programs and priorities, which in turn increases their popularity and brings them closer to their communities. Likewise, it is also important to strengthen the relationship between civil society and governance bodies, as it provides both with official protection and legitimacy. The more organised and united a community is, the better their ability to resist HTS' influence and imposed entities. Thus, efforts should aim to build social cohesion and a strong sense of ownership and unity among locals.

It is important to have realistic expectations about what Syrian civil society groups can achieve in the context of war, where violence – excessively used with total impunity – is a common practice. In this context, it is important to highlight that the ability of Syrian organisations

to continue to exist and to operate despite all these challenges is a big success in itself. And although it is unlikely that civil resistance will achieve a total victory against HTS, the tactics and strategies of civilian resistance in northern Syria presented in this research paper have clearly demonstrated their important contribution in challenging and protecting the local population from the expansion of radical groups such as HTS.

It is vital to establish strong relationships between civil society and local governing bodies as it provides such groups with official protection and legitimacy.



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Since early 2012, Adopt a Revolution has been supporting the young Syrian civil society. The German-Syrian solidarity organisation works closely with local initiatives in Syria which, despite war and terror, are committed to an open and democratic society based on human rights and minority rights and supports their work financially. In Germany, Adopt a Revolution conveys the current developments in Syrian civil society to the public and fosters the participation of Syrians in the German debate on Syria.

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