

## Article

# The Last Jihadist Battle in Syria: Externalisation and the Regional and International Responses to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib

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**Abstract:** When Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) seized Idlib, it alarmed and disturbed international observers. However, HTS is only one among a number of radical Islamist groups in a part of Syria that has become an incubator of Jihadism. As the last remaining redoubt of the armed opposition in the country, the governorate has become an international concern. Events have now reached an impasse, and the time is thus right for a reappraisal that steps back and considers contemporary developments in the wider context of ongoing events in the governorate. This article also places local developments in a wider context in another sense by considering how regional and international interventions contributed to HTS's rise in the Idlib governorate. This is particularly important as external interventions by Turkey, Iran, Russia and the US have not only failed to establish a sustainable basis for peace by addressing the root causes of violence but have actually inflamed hostilities and exacerbated the various challenges involved in ending the conflict, which has at times taken on the appearance of a proxy war. In seeking to better theorise externalisation, this article draws on peacebuilding theory. This historical and political contextualisation seeks to contribute to an improved understanding of HTS's rise and the means through which it can be most effectively combated in the future.

**Keywords:** Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS); intervention; Jihadism; proxy wars; terrorism



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## 1. Introduction

The observation that civil wars are complex is something of a banality. However, in the case of Syria's civil war, it is also true—more than half of Syria's pre-war population now live across the globe; more than 128-armed groups emerged in the conflict; and the war has now lasted for longer than a decade. The Syrian War broke out in March 2011, and then progressed through several stages. What was once a national component of a wider regional upheaval has now become a multi-faceted conflict with regional and international dimensions.

It is in the north-western province (*Muhafathat*) of Idlib<sup>1</sup> that the final acts of the civil war will be played out. By the end of 2019, Government forces, with the support of their Russian and Iranian allies, had pushed up to the south-east of Idlib city, with the aim of gaining total control of the main strategic motorways (M4–M5) and isolating the Idlib governorate. A further layer of complexity was added by the sustained intervention of regional and international actors, who each have very different visions of the country's future development. In the Idlib governorate, the local, regional and international coalesce, collide and disperse. It is not merely the last remaining opposition redoubt, but also where some sort of compromise will have to be worked out if the conflict is to be ended. In other words, it is not conceivable that the respective external parties and the Regime will be able to achieve their aims through force, and the only plausible way of achieving a resolution is to engage with 'local level' dynamics to a greater extent.

As a precondition, a reanalysis of empirical developments in Idlib is necessary, and this is the essential contribution of this article, which focuses on the specific example of HTS. This article also seeks to contribute to the analysis of events in the governorate on their own terms, rather than as a subset or outgrowth of the wider conflict. While the socio-political character of Idlib makes it difficult to make predictions in advance, this paper suggests that a closer analysis of ongoing events will make it possible to anticipate and sketch the general outlines of future developments. In the post-2016 era, the Regime regained the military and political momentum, effectively forcing the relocation of armed groups to the governorate through a series of agreements, and has therefore effectively treated it as a 'dumping ground' where armed opponents are corralled and concentrated, presumably in preparation of future military operations. However, this remains unclear, and a number of possible 'future options' remain open. The governorate could be forcibly reintegrated back into the Syrian 'nation'; could be permitted to retain some degree of autonomy; or could henceforth be excluded and 'cut off', following the model of the Gaza Strip.

This article begins by briefly sketching the background of the conflict in the Idlib province and by providing an overview of key groups; it then proceeds to separate levels of analysis. It first engages with a 'local' actor (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham or HTS) that is active in Idlib, and then proceeds to consider the regional dimension, and specifically the role of Iran and Turkey and their intermediaries in the conflict. It finally refers to the international level, specifically to Russia and the US, and then concludes by briefly highlighting future scenarios.

This article draws extensively on my own previously published research. For a number of reasons (including difficulties in obtaining access), developments in the governorate remain under-researched, and have more often tended to be discussed as a secondary preoccupation that is part of wider concerns (such as the Turkish intervention in the north of the country). This article also draws upon interviews conducted with activists and different grassroots actors in the 2020–2022 period. A total of 15 unstructured interviews were conducted over social media (WhatsApp, Messenger, Skype), with the interviewees having been via social media. The interviewees were anonymous and I did not record names nor any other details, including their current country of residence. This was important because some were activists and were seeking asylum in foreign countries. The interviews varied in length, and lasted between 45 min and 2 h. The ages, occupations and social backgrounds of the interviewees also varied.

## 2. The (Ir)Relevance of Peacebuilding Theory

The local–international tension has been a defining feature of peacebuilding ever since international actors first applied the practice in post-conflict settings. The associated literature does not define the two as separate but rather as related—the international is part of the local, and vice versa. The subsequent analysis of empirical developments in the Idlib province will show this by demonstrating how the development of HTS has been framed, guided and orientated by external influence. This article does not refer to the peacebuilding literature in the expectation that there is, or will henceforth be, any basis for sustainable peacebuilding. Instead, it appears more likely that the province will continue to exist precariously in a state that is neither war nor peace, in which the threat of resumed violence is perpetually present. It views the example of peacebuilding as providing clear insight into the mutually constitutive relationship between the 'internal' and 'external' and 'local' and 'international'. In acknowledging the development of peacebuilding, we can gain an improved understanding of the relationship between the two levels that will substantially aid and assist our analysis of the development of HTS and the contemporary situation in the Idlib province.

It is first essential to recall that, in its initial form, peacebuilding was a highly externalised practice and was guided by a largely technical model of external reform that was effectively 'engineered' by external actors (United Nations 1995). As a result, UN interventions in a variety of countries were criticised for having been 'top down' and insuf-

ficiently responsive to 'local' needs and perspectives (Belloni 2012). The subsequent shift to a more 'localised' model of engagement and intervention was not just guided by normative considerations but also by the practical requirements of achieving peacebuilding goals (Jarat and Tanja 2004). It was in this context that peacebuilding was defined, both in terms of its implementation and end products, as a project grounded in the active engagement and participation of 'local' actors. At least theoretically, the 'externalising impulse' was replaced by an emphasis on endogenous practices that operated 'from within'. As part of this paradigmatic 'turn', external actors did not direct or even orientate but instead sought to subtly cultivate or 'enable' change to attain its own momentum, direction and form (Jarat and Tanja 2004). However, peacebuilding theory and practice ultimately never fully divested itself of a strategizing impulse, and the associated desire to orientate and direct. Additionally, this is how 'empowerment' and 'participation' came to function as external 'technologies' geared towards the reproduction of external aims and intentions. The actual implementation of peacebuilding therefore became entrapped in something of a purgatory, in which it oscillated between external strategy and 'local' participation. It did not appear as one or another, but rather as a 'hybrid' form.

This feature became even more pronounced after peacebuilding was incorporated alongside other tools of external and made to function as part of a 'comprehensive' approach to conflict intervention and resolution. Peacebuilding was therefore incorporated alongside security and development practices, including stabilisation. This 'comprehensive approach', which combined development, democracy promotion and security in a triad, meant that peacebuilding was increasingly theorised in relation to other objectives, such as those related to security (disarmament, demobilization, arms control, security sector reform and reintegration of former combatants) (Department for International Development 2010). This realignment of the three elements of the triad reached its logical conclusion in a 'light-touch' model of external intervention that reduced the costs of intervention, including international responsibility for the end consequences of intervention. In reflecting on these developments in peacebuilding theory and practice, we see that the situation in Idlib does not posit the 'international' and 'local' in direct opposition. Rather, the 'local' instead appears as an instrument for the realisation of external designs and intentions. By extended implication, the governorate can be seen as a nexus that conjoins the local and international. This article will therefore not engage from the premise of externalisation, in which the emphasis is on direct intervention by state actors; rather, it will instead seek to identify how external actors have sought to achieve influence through mediated interventions in which 'local' actors have a considerable degree of autonomy. From the outset, media coverage and political analysis of the conflict has been marked, or perhaps distorted, by an over-emphasis on external actors, to the point where the conflict has appeared almost as a chessboard, in which the respective 'local' pieces are moved about at will by external powers. This has always been a simplistic distortion, not least because the conflict was a spontaneous reaction to decades of Regime repression. The internationalisation of the conflict after 2014, however, increasingly occluded or even absented this 'local' dimension. The focus on international actors also overstated their ability to influence developments on the ground, to the point of presenting international intervention as a condition for the achievement of particular goals or objectives. However, as the subsequent discussion demonstrates, this ignored the influence of local actors, who continued to possess considerable agency and, by implication, the ability to affect conflict outcomes.

### 3. HTS's Rise in Idlib

Al-Nusra and ISIS were the most prominent jihadist groups (Stenersen 2020)<sup>2</sup> in the governorate. The former's association with Al-Qaeda and the latter's campaign of international terrorism rendered them particular objects of international concern (Lister 2015). Jabhat al-Nusra (The Support Front for the People of Greater Syria) was formally established in January 2012, but its roots extended further back to the summer of 2011, when the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) sent a small group into Syria who were led by Abu-

Mohammad al-Julani (Lister 2015).<sup>3</sup> Al-Nusra was, from its inception, crucially defined by the tension between the 'local' and 'international' elements of the Salafist (Bakkour and Sahtout 2022a)<sup>4</sup> jihadist movement (Cafarella 2014). Additionally, this is precisely why Al-Julani tried to present al-Nusra as an organic, Syrian group that was committed to overthrowing the Regime, destroying the secular state and establishing Islam as the foundation of Syrian society (Lesch 2018). The group launched several bombing attacks and armed assaults on Regime positions and, in the period the summer of 2012–March 2013, emerged as one of the most powerful insurgent groups (Lister 2015).

In obvious contrast to ISIS, Al-Nusra also sought to align with international actors and agendas. This is why it cut off all ties to Al-Qaeda (as they declared it) in July 2016, when it established itself (on July) as part of the Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) alliance (Bakkour and Sahtout 2022a), which then morphed into Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in January 2017. Again, in contrast to ISIS, it has demonstrated a greater responsiveness to the needs and requirements of the governorate's population, and this has enabled it to establish itself as a security guarantor and key political actor (Bakkour and Stansfield 2023, pp. 126–45). It fully grasped that it could not impose its political vision on a host society, and this had a crucial influence on its governance of Syria. Its flexible and adaptive governing style, which fused coercion, ideology and social service provision, enabled it to become established in the province (Bakkour and Sahtout 2022a, pp. 81–97). The transformation of HTS has enabled it to become involved in local governance and security and therefore compete with external actors (Sosnowski 2020, pp. 460–75). Although the US' response has been unclear and sometimes contradictory, it has persisted in viewing the group as an outgrowth of the broader jihadi threat, which is perhaps understandable given its refusal to recognize a modern national "State" or international boundaries. The US made its position clear in March 2017, when its special envoy to Syria told observers that this 'rebranding' would not alter his country's view of the organisation (Bakkour and Sahtout 2022a, pp. 81–97).

HTS sought to institutionalise internal authority, and it gradually imposed administrative regulations that limited the application of many religious concepts associated with jihadism. This institutionalisation also enabled the traditional Islamic schools of jurisprudence (Madhhab) to reassert and impose internal control, acknowledge local norms, and negate the influence of foreign jihadi intellectuals (Bakkour and Sahtout 2022a, pp. 81–97). HTS never renounced its Salafi religious creed and beliefs, but effectively restricted their implementation by drawing on other Sharia concepts to justify its new political orientations (Lister 2020).

The governorate became a patchwork of mini kingdoms ruled by local groups and factions, which was directly opposed to the arrangements required for military defence and political representation (interviews with activists January 2020). The establishment of a single administrative body to rule in Idlib was not just a HTS project (Bishara 2018, pp. 34–35)<sup>5</sup>; however, most insurgents, having been deterred by the sheer impracticality of this enterprise, refused to countenance it or take up the challenge. The emergence of multiple sources of authority that exacerbated internal fragmentation had, however, prevented the emergence of common regulations and rules throughout the governorate; it also exacerbated tensions that derived from foreign intervention.

The emergence of religiously influenced political dissidence has seriously threatened HTS and has the potential to erode its local legitimacy and organisational cohesion. It therefore seriously recognised the need to implement strict religious regulations in order to eliminate political opponents. In the meantime, the group's leaders also wanted to distance themselves from state lets that previously implemented harsh interpretations of Islamic Law. This quickly became apparent when HTS engaged in a tacit rapprochement with foreign countries, and Turkey in particular. This antagonised many individuals and factions who viewed its government's secularism as a problem. They included HTS commanders who left the group to create an aligned alternative (*Hurras al-Din* or the Guardians of Religion), prominent commanders, and religious scholars who initially remained in the HTS. The HTS then militarily confronted adversaries who included Ahrar al-Sham Movement,<sup>6</sup> which

was then fighting as part of the Front of National Liberation (FNL). They were then forced out of most of the governorate (Haid 2017).

In this and other respects, the group tried to ‘rebrand’ itself as a security provider within the Idlib province. After a series of IED, (improvised explosive device) attacks on Idlib City, it carried out security operations (Human Rights 2019)<sup>7</sup> with the aim of gaining control of most of the governorate (Pitel 2020). This confirmed its willingness to be part of a comprehensive political solution, and to contribute to a de-escalation agreement engineered by external actors (Harris 2018, p. 168). Al-Nusra’s governance focused strongly on the needs of the local population, and it recognised the potential of service provision as a way of gaining local support and recruiting new volunteers. It also knew that this would weaken the local councils, its main competitor, and avoid the costs that direct coercion would otherwise incur. It also viewed control of basic resources, such as electricity and water, as a way of gaining political influence (Bakkour and Sahtout 2022a, pp. 81–97).

The HTS was deeply rooted within Idlib, which provided an important base for its military and security operations. It controlled Idlib’s economic life by exerting influence over areas that ‘border’ parts of the country controlled by the Regime and Turkey. These crossings<sup>8</sup> generate enormous funds, and the HTS takes its share of taxes from imported or removed goods. The HTS’s entrance into the banking world included the direct or indirect ownership of remittance and money exchange offices and the building of extensive relationships with merchants (Messenger interviews with activist, January 2021). It mainly handled the fuel trade through Watad Company, which monopolized the importation of oil derivatives (WhatsApp interviews with Merchant 2021). A large amount of public and private property was also seized and looted—some was used to establish military headquarters and Sharia courts, and other parts were distributed to HTS members and their dependents (Syrian for Truth and Justice Centre 2017).

#### 4. Turkey’s Intervention

The intervention in the governorate illustrates the multilevel dynamics of intrastate conflict. Regional involvement and interdependencies between different levels subsequently emerged as defining features. Bakkour argues that the conflict has been perpetuated by various circuits of power that connect “stable” spaces to conflict and establish overlapping cartographies of militarization (Al-Dhib 2014). Erdogan’s ‘neo-Ottoman adventurism’ has led the Turkish government to become increasingly involved in the affairs of its immediate neighbours. Ankara’s support for the FSA and some Islamist groups (al-Sham Corps) has underlined its desire to remove al-Assad from power. Turkey facilitated the delivery of Saudi and Qatari arms and tolerated the inflow of foreign jihadists into Syria, many of whom later joined groups such as ISIS and HTS (Stiftung 2018). Turkey also believed that the Arab Spring could be used to establish a regional order that Turkey could dominate (Phillips 2016, p. 75).

Turkey shares a long border with the governorate, which brings to mind Lindsey’s observation that wars that occur in close proximity have a causal influence on each other. Proximate civil wars present a new series of challenges, including the movement of combatants, non-combatants, and arms across state boundaries (Balch-Lindsay and Enteline 2000, pp. 615–42). However, the situation in Idlib did not serve Turkey’s interests as it was extremely complex. Although a substantial number of opposition forces were present, Turkey’s scope for military intervention was limited by the Russian military presence, which made it impossible for it to directly intervene (Kaya 2016). The HTS, for its part, believed that the establishment of a technocratic government that preserves internal stability and enjoys Turkish acceptance was key to its survival. This would also provide reassurance that the insurgent-held governorate would not be a militant Islamism emirate or a safe haven that could serve as a launch pad for foreign attacks. The HTS has accordingly implemented an array of religious and security policies that will maintain internal order and uphold the group’s international commitments (Dervon and Haenni 2021).

On 26 August 2016, it announced the beginning of ‘Euphrates Shield Operation’, which sought to create a secure corridor in the space between the Turkish border and the town of Al-Bab in Aleppo (Stansfield and Shareef 2017). In seeking to justify the ‘Euphrates Shield’ objectives, Erdoğan claimed this ‘new step’ was necessary to protect his country’s security and prevent a ‘terror corridor’ from emerging. He also believed Turkey would need to be present on the ground if it was to influence future developments in the country (Phillips 2017). Turkey had originally used the ‘Euphrates Shield’ to support opposition forces and achieve its immediate objective of driving ISIS back from the Turkish border (Bakkour and Sahtout 2022b). Turkey accordingly established several military checkpoints there (İşiksal and Göksel 2018, pp. 160–65), in the apparent belief that its military presence would deter Kurdish forces from approaching and accessing the Mediterranean Sea (Bakkour and Sahtout 2022b). Turkey also believed that, with the help of the remaining mainstream rebel factions it would be able to push onto Idlib and expel the HTS (Phillips 2017).

The establishment of a single civilian administration only became possible when the HTS established its military pre-eminence in the province (Dervon and Haenni 2021). Its attempts to facilitate peace have moved through various stages, from trying to impose an agenda for peace and political transition, to forging great power consensus, and building peace from the “bottom-up” through ceasefires and local reconciliations (Bâli and Aziz 2017). The emergence of an order of this kind is reflected at both the domestic and regional levels, with the Regime upholding illiberal norms and the tripartite Astana powers (Russia, Turkey and Iran) seeking (at least ostensibly) to resolve conflict (Cengiz 2020, pp. 200–14). The Astana process has subordinated Syrian sovereignty to the wishes and intentions of the tripartite powers. It committed Iran, Russia, and Turkey to establish a safe zone in the Idlib province, and they agreed to divide the province into three zones, which would each be controlled by a single country. In January 2018, Turkey launched the “Olive Branch Operation”, which entered the Afrin region in Aleppo and Idlib’s borders. This “security” and “preventive” operation sought to curtail Kurdish advances into northern Syria and to use military checkpoints to establish control over the Azaz region (Al-Hilu 2019). Both of Erdoğan’s ‘security’ (Pelino 2018) objectives were eventually achieved. As part of its ‘de-escalation’ intervention, Turkey then established twelve observation points in the Idlib province. A road was established that connected the Euphrates Shield area with the western region of the Aleppo countryside and the governorate of Idlib, and this helped to produce a semi-siege of Afrin (Bakkour and Sahtout 2022a).

These innovations in peacebuilding theory provide insight into the precise nature and meaning of ‘regional’ and ‘international’ intervention in Idlib. Strictly speaking, this can be defined as a stabilisation intervention that approaches conflict from within a security paradigm. It is a ‘securitised’ engagement that seeks to resolve conflict by applying force (Ministry of Defence 2009). The leaders of Turkey and Russia met after the “Operation”, and their final agreement committed them to establishing a buffer zone (Frantzman 2018). The communique that emerged from the meeting between Macron, Putin, Erdoğan and Merkel also stated that the political conditions for the safe and voluntary return of refugees needed to be established and committed each party to working towards putting a constitutional committee in place (Bakkour and Sahtout 2022a). The refugee issue was a clear matter of importance for Turkey, which already hosts more than three and half million refugees; as the world’s largest recipient, it provides substantial support that includes housing complexes, and has ongoing concerns about ISIS infiltration. There are also almost 2.5 million IDPs in Idlib (Şaban 2020, pp. 111–19). Turkey also has the support of the Biden administration. Biden himself observed that “Regardless of our differences with Turkey now, we are aware of the impact of its operations in Idlib on preserving the lives of Syrians, and we will work together on that” (Bakkour and Sahtout 2022a).

## 5. Iran’s Intervention

Iran has strongly supported the Assad regime in the civil war: it deployed a small number of IRGC advisers almost immediately after the start of the war, and enabled other

foreign Shia militants<sup>9</sup> to fight and help compensate for the Regime's manpower shortage (Nerguizian 2015). Iran (with Hezbollah) improved the Regime's training and equipment, and helped to direct its strategy and tactics. It spearheaded the creation of the National Defence Force, a collection of domestic local paramilitaries who were more disciplined than the unruly Shabiha, and helped to supplement the military by providing checkpoints and local security. Somewhat ironically, Iran, which had spent decades trying to disrupt the established regional order, now sought to preserve the post-2003 status quo.

Meanwhile, its great regional rival, conservative Saudi Arabia, was promoting change (Phillips 2016, p. 151). Iran's strategic focus had several aspects. Firstly, the Regime was a key bridge to deliver weapons to Hezbollah (Bakkour 2022b). Secondly, Syria's proximity to Israel and the oPt (Occupied Palestinian Territories) enabled Iran to strengthen its ties with Palestinian groups, most notably Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas, whose political wing was headquartered in Damascus. Finally, after Iraq's post-2003 transformation from Tehran's traditional enemy into one of its closest friends and trade partners, Syria emerged as an outer wall of defence for it. In addition, Iran also viewed Syria as being of significant symbolic religious value (Mabon 2013, p. 200). Iran's interventions in the Idlib governorate were primarily driven by ideology, as it sought to support Kafarya and Al-Fhouha, two Shiite towns. This brought to mind Clientelism, (Powell 1970, pp. 411–25). and specifically, a Sect Clientelism embodied in a structured relationship between a patron (Iran) and client (Shiite towns). Both towns had received groups of Shiite military militias, who were deployed from Iran, Lebanon, and Iraq and who promoted sectarian mobilization in these towns (Hinnebusch 2018). Iran's influence extended to IRGC leaders and the leaders of Shiite towns, and this established the basis for a sect-based patron–client relationship rooted in unconditional mutual trust (Reeves 1990, p. 170). This recalls Leff's observation that Iran's political and military leaders seek to insert their party's agenda in the sect's public interest (Leff 1968). The patron sought to divert its total affiliation and resources to its own agent rather than the authority. Iran, in its role as patron, used its ideology and traditional norms to manipulate the political sentiments of both Shiite towns. For as long as patron–client ideological relations maintain the reciprocal interests of both parties, the alliance will remain intact (WhatsApp Interviews with Idlib activists, January 2021). The influence of IRGC military forces on decision-making in both towns grew at every stage of the Idlib battles, and both towns were recognised as linchpins of Iranian influence in Idlib (WhatsApp Interviews with Residents of both towns, January 2021).

Kafarya and Al-Fhouha were subjected to a partial siege after the escalation of military confrontations between Regime forces and the Opposition in mid-2012. Under the leadership of al-Nusra Front and "Ahrar al-sham", the partial siege turned into a total siege after the Jaish al-Fateh coalition seized control of Idlib City in mid-2015 (Hinnebusch 2018). In a revenge operation, Regime forces and Iranian militias began to besiege Madaya and Zabadani (in the Damascus countryside) in March 2015. The targeting of civilians resulted in a sharp deterioration of humanitarian conditions in both locations. The residents became a bargaining chip, and the parties used their fate to achieve their strategic interests during negotiations (Amnesty International 2017). In response to these developments, Turkey sponsored negotiations that produced a truce between Iran and Ahrar al-Sham, the lifting of the siege and the freezing of military action in the four towns and their surrounding areas (Bakkour 2022b). Forced displacement from the four towns occurred in several stages and concluded in July 2018 (Al-Quds Al-Arabi 2018).

Iran played the sectarian card by using the displacement agreement to replace the residents of Zabadani and Madaya with Shiites from Idlib. The displacement of these two towns was intended as a prelude to redrawing the borders of the Syrian demographic map, and strengthening the Iranian presence in the Damascus region and the surrounding countryside. This would complete the sectarian project that Iran aspired to in the region by fragmenting the region into parts (Bakkour 2022a, pp. 1–18). Kafarya and Al Fu'ah were cards in the hands of the factions. After the evacuation, both towns were used to launch several offensives on Idlib and enabled the Regime to gain control of south-eastern Idlib.

## 6. Russia's 'Long Strategy' in Idlib

Russia's intervention in the civil war played a crucial role in changing the direction and eventual outcome. Analysts of this intervention note that all major decisions come from Putin. His views on the subject are rooted in an instinctively nationalist and anti-western worldview and are also influenced by Orientalism, as shown by his belief that Syria, in common with the rest of the Middle East, cannot sustain democracy. He viewed the 'Arab Spring' as being driven by Islamic rather than democratic forces and believed that the multi-ethnic Syrian society was only held in place by a strong Regime. Putin believed that denying the US a role in the country provided a sufficient justification for backing Assad—in the (private) words of one insider, who remarked, 'the key word for Moscow is not "Assad" but "intervention" (Phillips 2016, p. 151). However, this was clearly problematic, as Russian intervention had the potential to further inflame the conflict—this is confirmed by Stofft and Guertner (1995), who observe that "Unilateral interventions establish precedents that lead to bolder, potentially destabilizing behaviour by other governments". Under Putin, the Russian Orthodox Church was increasingly influential and, according to Trenin, became a centrepiece of national identity and foreign policy (Trenin 2013). Religious leaders pressed Moscow to ensure the safety of Syria's Christians, who accounted for eight percent of the population and were mostly Orthodox. They had also experienced persecution at the hands of more extreme parts of the Opposition. Putin had also fought Islamism in both wars in Chechnya (Phillips 2016)<sup>10</sup>, and was determined to maintain the political capital he had gained as a consequence.

Russia's efforts to counteract the Opposition have increasingly focused on Idlib. It viewed Idlib as a centre of Jihadist opposition to the Regime and also views it as sheltering international terrorism (HTS—Ahrar al-Sham-Hurras al-Din; ISIS cells) that threatens its long-term interests and priorities (Harris 2018, pp. 167–69). It viewed the possibility of an Islamic state with particular apprehension. It viewed the HTS as a legitimate target and believed it should be targeted with the intention of establishing de-escalation zones. Rick Francona, the former US military attaché, observed that the concentration of opposition forces in one location (Idlib) is consistent with the long-term Russian strategy in the region. He observed that Russia and the Regime will not allow the opposition to leave and contends their fall will only be a matter of time (Brown 2018).

Russian intervention in Idlib and the civil war more generally shows how third party intervention can use a range of options, including the use of military force, to alter the probability that one side will achieve victory (Balch-Lindsay and Enteline 2000, pp. 615–42). This intervention also demonstrated the potential utility of military force in civil wars, as Russian airstrikes, which made extensive use of missiles, barrels and shells, enabled the Regime to gain many areas of Idlib and enter the governorate's administrative borders. Russia 'justified' its actions by citing the dangers of sectarian warfare and the possibility that the chaos of the war could spread across the globe. Russia continued to be concerned about American intentions in Idlib and claimed that the Pentagon had used armed groups in Idlib (Syria Revolutionaries Front, Sham Corps and the (first Coast Division) to push into rural areas of Latakia that are close to the Russian military base (International Crisis Group 2020). Russian intervention within Idlib was complicated when the HTS shot down a helicopter in early February 2018, and also claimed to have brought down a plane with a surface-to-air missile. The HTS had also previously demonstrated that it could inflict substantial damages on Russian forces, and this was in large part due to its extensive experience of the conflict terrain that it had gained over several years of operating in Idlib under different names.

## 7. US Intervention

When engaging with ongoing conflicts, intervening parties will almost inevitably engage with questions of grand strategy, which Blechman and Kaplan define as upholding the credibility of commitments to allies, preventing the spread of an ideology and sending a message about the overarching aims of foreign policy (Blechman and Kaplan 1978,



p. 59). The strategy should identify the target, set out the schedule of intervention and guide the application of force (Blechman and Kaplan 2002, pp. 3–12). Several domestic political and personal motivations, including a leader's desire to increase his/her political power, should also be taken into account (Diehl 1992, pp. 333–44). During the process of intervention, a range of internal influences will act on the US' foreign policy, and the interaction between different branches, including the State Department and the Pentagon, is particularly important in this respect. Obama's non-ideological approach enabled him to overcome these tensions to some extent, as he was able to address issues on the basis of a case-by-case approach that upheld the US' interests. He wanted to reduce the US' physical presence in the Middle East, as he believed this was an essential precondition for restoring his country's reputation in the wider region (Gerges 2012). He also viewed Syria as an appropriate place to pursue some sort of rapprochement with Iran and Russia; some sort of agreement with Assad would also help to ensure that the eastward flow of Jihadist would not recommence and could even contribute to the long-established Saudi Arabian goal of 'flipping' Syria into a pro-western position (Phillips 2016, p. 27). The Regime's (alleged) use of chemical weapons in the civil war was a clear obstacle. The largest number of deaths was caused in 21 August 2013 due to a nerve gas attack, which, according to the US government, resulted in over 1400 deaths (Bakkour 2022b). The threat of US-led military action was only offset when Russia proposed an agreement that would remove Assad's chemical weapons capability (Bakkour 2022b).

The removal of this capability was, however, an illusion, as was shown on 4 April 2017, when a Regime chemical strike killed (an estimated) 100 people in the town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib province (BBC 2017). Almost four years after the initial attack elicited international outrage and condemnation, the issue of chemical weapons returned to the centre of the international agenda. However, this attack on the Al-Shayrat air base, which the Pentagon believed was used to store missiles that could be used for chemical attacks, was essentially symbolic. The US was aware of the difficulties that would arise if 'rebels' groups such as the FSA were crushed, as this would increase the likelihood of the dispossessed Sunni majority gravitating towards Islamist and Jihadist groups. From a US perspective, a weakened FSA was, however, the best option, as this would make it more inclined to accept the US' agendas. US support for rebel groups in Idlib broadly resembled the precedent of US support given to Iraqi Sunni militias (*Sahwat*) in Iraq in the period 2006–2007, which ultimately resulted in the defeat of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. This helped the US to learn that mobilising Sunni fighters to fight Sunni jihadists was a preferable alternative to relying on Iranian-backed Shiites, which encouraged "sectarian conflict" (Bakkour 2022b).

The US' strategy also enabled military and economic assistance to be provided incrementally (Regan 2002, pp. 55–73). The US tried to limit its assistance to the FSA, both because of the group's revolutionary objectives and a separate concern that weapons could end up in the hands of jihadists (Karadjis 2017). In a broader perspective, the US came to view the Syrian conflict as part of a wider 'War on Terrorism' (Al-Haj Saleh 2017). The US' labelling of al-Nusra Front as a terrorist group was a precursor of what was to come (Centre for International Security and Cooperation 2016). When John Kerry, Obama's secretary of state, expressed concern that Idlib could be the site of a war of annihilation, his own envoy appeared to almost welcome this possibility (Heller 2016). This appeared to suggest that, in Idlib at least, the countering of terrorism could supersede other strategic objectives. The Trump's administration's subsequent focus on chemical weapons also showed a lack of strategic focus, as they are, after all, only one among a few tools of terror deployed by the Regime in the conflict (Rogin 2017).

When Trump entered the White House, JFS was in the process of converting to HTS. Despite the fact that this abandonment of the image of the Mujahedeen had clear implications for its political discourse, structure and tactics, the US continued to maintain that its position on the original group would not change. In addition, indeed, it continued to regard the HTS as little more than a façade for Al-Qaeda in Syria: all groups that operated under its rubric would, effectively irrespective of their actual ideological and/or tactical positions,

henceforth be considered to be aligned with Al-Qaeda (Heller 2016). Al-Julani suggested the HTS would henceforth be based on Islamic jurisprudence (Lister 2020). While it was hardly unique among rebel groups in this respect, this did not deter the US from almost exclusively focusing on the HTS, as the US special envoy to Syria made clear when he noted the following:

The Syrian north saw one of its biggest tragedies as the Sham Liberation Organization (HTS) and the Golani gang, in particular, launched their latest aggression against the Syrian people and the factions. [E]veryone has to know that Al-Julani and his gang are responsible for the terrible consequences that will befall Idlib (Bakkour and Sahtout 2022a). The plan that Rex Tillerson, the US Secretary of State, outlined with the aim of preventing ISIS from re-emerging, emphasised both reconstruction and stabilisation (Humud et al. 2017). Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response". His plan addressed the concerns of key allies (most notably Turkey) and tried to identify how the Syrian government could be pressurised to engage in meaningful negotiations. By the beginning of 2018, the Regime had, with the support of Russia, launched many military offensives on Idlib. Trump had previously offered unqualified praise of Assad and Putin, and this appeared to raise the prospect of mutual understandings emerging (Aljazeera 2017), and of the US developing a strategic focus that had been manifestly lacking throughout the conflict.

## 8. Conclusions

The HTS has become established in Idlib through its alignment with local forces and dynamics that in many respects reflected its awareness that it could not achieve its goals through direct force and imposition. Whenever required, it has nonetheless successfully asserted its authority and crushed opposition groups that do not share its radical Islamist agenda. After the displacement of the Shiite towns, Iran's role in Idlib has also diminished; therefore, it seems that both Turkey, which has a clear material interest, and Russia will now call the shots in bringing the situation to a close. It should also be remembered that the HTS has, to some extent, responded to international influence, and its very establishment was an attempt to distance itself from Al-Qaeda and to establish itself as a credible actor that external powers could do businesses with. Nonetheless, this has not prevented it from being identified as an appropriate 'target' for international intervention.

The US' dismissal of this 'rebranding' as 'window-dressing' may conceivably prove counter-productive, as it is conceivable that this could empower more 'extremist' elements who would be able to claim that the US' position would remain the same, irrespective of any changes or adjustments by Islamists. It could also be argued that the US' position was decided upon considering its own (i.e., counterterrorism) priorities, and gave almost no consideration to the (still open) question of Syria's post-war peacebuilding. The decisive defeat of 'terrorist' groups may well be in the interest of other external powers (most notably Turkey), but could actually hinder the efforts of the Regime to promote reconciliation. The Regime's efforts to rebuild the country cannot rest entirely on force, especially given its own narrow basis of public support and the number of Syrians who participated in the uprising and Revolution. The pursuit of a 'final victory' over the HTS could, as shown in the last analysis, actually complicate or even undermine post-conflict processes. Considering this, it is entirely conceivable that external and internal agendas will further diverge as the final conflict approaches.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Idlib: (6100 km<sup>2</sup>) is one of Syria's governorates that overlooks Turkey's Iskenderun province to the north; Aleppo to the east; Hama to the south and Latakia to the west. In 2010, its population was 1.5 million. However, just a decade later, this figure had increased almost three-fold (4.3 m) ([Syrian Response Unite 2020](#)).
- <sup>2</sup> Jihadists targeted the 'Kuffar' (or 'nonbeliever') and adopted a more rigid reading of the Qur'an that combines Salafi Jihadism with Sunni sectarianism. Jihadism appeals to ultra-conservative Muslims who favour action over patience. Stenersen also suggests it is defined using violence (framed as 'Jihad') to achieve political aims and the rejection of the nation-state and its corollary of the international order.
- <sup>3</sup> Abo Mohamad Al-Julani: Syrian Salafist jihadist who had previously been imprisoned by US forces in Camp Bucca in Iraq. Julani spent months building a Jihadist network that eventually formed al-Nusra.
- <sup>4</sup> Salafism is an ultra-conservative Islamist ideology that takes its name from 'the pious forefathers' (Salaf as-Salih), namely the Prophet Muhammad and his early followers, whose lives are viewed as models of emulation.
- <sup>5</sup> The HTS emerged after the loss of most Al-Nusra strongholds. It was unique in Idlib because it viewed Jihad as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end. Other Salafists interpret it more instrumentally—that is, as a tool that can be used to achieve specific political aims.
- <sup>6</sup> Ahrar al-Sham's long-term objective was to build an Islamic society based on Sharia law in Idlib. Although it rejected the principle and practice of inclusive secular democracy, it sought to reconcile political freedom with Sharia law. It did not believe in conducting global jihad to expand the scope of the Islamic world.
- <sup>7</sup> The group met with the interim government (Salvation) on several occasions, with the aim of persuading it to support its work. This was combined with repression—HTS security prisons replaced their Regime predecessors, with Al-Oqab prison in the Jabaal al-Zawiya region emerging as the most renowned and feared of them.
- <sup>8</sup> The Bab al-Hawa crossing conjoins Europe, Jordan, Syria, and the Arabian Gulf, which holds importance.
- <sup>9</sup> The fighters initially came from Iraq (until 2014, when many returned to fight ISIS), and then Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- <sup>10</sup> Russia has a substantial Muslim population, which accounts for 21–23 million of its total population of 144 million. The Muslim birth-rate is significantly higher than the 'native' average. Fourteen percent of Russia's population is Muslim, and the Kremlin feared Syrian radicals might inspire domestic Islamist violence, not only in north Caucasian trouble spots but also by 'inciting' Russian and Central Asian Muslim migrants in Moscow. The government cited numerous Islamist terrorist attacks during the 2000s and viewed the FSA as Islamist and susceptible to infiltration by Al-Qaeda. The number of Russian-speaking Islamists heading to Syria (and Idlib in particular) to join the rebels was a further source of concern.

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