

“HAYAT TAHRIR AL-SHAM” IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT: METAMORPHOSIS OF THE TERRORIST GROUP

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One of the actors in the armed conflict in Syria is the extremist group “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham” (HTS), which controls the territory of Idlib province in coordination with a number of other armed groups. Originally emerging as closely associated with the al-Qaeda terrorist network as “al-Nusra Front”, this organization has undergone a number of transformations in recent years as a result of both external and internal factors. Consistently loyal to jihadist principles, “al-Nusra Front” (and its incarnations, such as “Jabhat Fatah al-Sham” and “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham”) has demonstrated a certain flexibility throughout its history, which manifested in its attempts to adapt to changes and the wide use of soft power tools. The article analyzes the reasons for the rebranding of the group, which is trying to get rid of the odious image not only in the eyes of the Syrians, but also in the international arena. In particular, the author concludes that HTS is guided by the example of the Afghani Taliban movement in its attempts to obtain the status of a legitimate and negotiable participant in the conflict. There are signs that the strategy chosen by HTS is partly working with its message received in the Western expert community. It calls for a revision of the United States’ and its allies’ policies in relation to the HTS group, which has allegedly “severed ties with transnational jihadist networks and now seeks to enter the sphere of political participation in the future of Syria”. The article maintains that there are doubts about both the possibility of a conscious evolution of HTS into a more moderate movement, and the sincerity of their rejection of the “global jihad” agenda as declared by the group’s leaders. There is reason to believe that the group is not going to completely abandon terrorist activities outside the zone of the Syrian conflict.

Keywords: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, HTS, al-Nusra Front, Jabhat al-Nusra, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, Syria, al-Qaeda, ISIS, IS, Islamic State, Khurras al-Din, Ahrar al-Sham, Idlib, Islamism, Jihadism, Extremism, Taliban.

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The extremist group *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS, Organisation for the Liberation of the Levant)¹ has in recent years become the most powerful rebel force in the Idlib province of Syria held by the armed opposition. Throughout its existence, the organisation has gone through a series of transformations driven by internal and external factors. It is this evolution that makes one ponder a question: is it merely a change of signage, an ostensible rebranding, or some kind of internal transformation of one of the most odious actors in the armed conflict in Syria?

In the past, the HTS group was known as *Al-Nusra Front* (ANF, *Jabhat al-Nusra*, or *Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham* – Support Front for the Peo-

ple of Al-Sham)², which was considered a Syrian “branch” of the international Al-Qaeda network³. Moreover, genetically this group is connected not only with Al-Qaeda but also with ISIL⁴ since the vanguard of the fighters and organisers of the future ANF was sent to Syria in coordination with the group “Islamic State of Iraq” (that had undergone some organisational transformations of Al-Qaeda in Iraq in the past) [1, p. 2; 2, p. 100]. Meanwhile, due to this transformation series, the issue of HTS’s connection with transnational terrorist networks (and consequently, the nature of the group itself) remains debatable. As defined by the Center for

¹ The Resolution of the Russian Federation Supreme Court as of June 4, 2020 declared HTS a terrorist group, and its activities are banned in the Russian Federation.

² The Resolution of the Russian Federation Supreme Court as of December 29, 2014 declared ANF a terrorist group, and its activities are banned in the Russian Federation.

³ A terrorist group banned in the Russian Federation.

⁴ The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, IS, Islamic State) – a terrorist group banned in the Russian Federation.

Strategic and International Studies, “Today, HTS can be regarded as a relatively localised Syrian terrorist organisation which retains the Salafist-Jihadist ideology despite the public split with Al-Qaeda in 2017” [3].

According to Naumkin’s and Kuznetsov’s classification, HTS can be classified as a “sub-state transnational actor” in the Middle East; however, they note that it belongs to the groups that are difficult to categorise unambiguously: “While the overwhelming majority of experts consider it a branch of Al-Qaeda, some of them tend to consider it to be a local Syrian force which claimed to belong to this terrorist organisation only once, by coincidence” [4, p. 108].

In January 2012, ANF officially announced its entry into the Syrian armed conflict against al-Assad’s power. The group, which had its combat units in almost all Syrian provinces, became able not only to occupy the “leading place among the Syrian Jihadist-Salafist organisations” [5, pp. 655-656] but also to become “the most efficient of all oppositional paramilitary structures in this conflict, copying in many ways the experience of special action forces of the leading world countries” [5, p. 660]. The ANF leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani⁵ “quickly created a powerful organisation that secured support of its donors in the Persian Gulf, collected revenues on taxes and confiscated assets on the territories under its control, learned to wage insurgent attacks and attracted increasing numbers of fighters” [3]. Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, jihadist groups proved to be at the forefront of a quite motley movement opposing the Assad regime. They attracted both local and foreign assailants. However, soon the jihadists showed certain discord, especially when many of them started suspecting al-Jolani and his group of intention to monopolise control of the political scene. The disagreement between ANF and ISIL, as well as tension with Al-Qaeda, led to the emergence of three different jihadist groups in Syria: one of them supported Nusra, the other was self-isolated, and the third one was closer to ISIL [6].

Consistently faithful to jihadist principles, ANF (and its incarnations *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* and HTS) has shown certain flexibility throughout its history,

⁵ Other variants of the name of the extremist group’s leader (Jolani, Golani, etc.) can also be found. There is an opinion that Abu Muhammad al-Jolani is an alias of Ahmed al-Shar’a, a Syrian from a family of Golan Heights natives, who went to Iraq in 2003 to fight for jihadist groups.

trying to adapt to the situational changes and making extensive use of “soft power” tools. As Gasymov notes, this group, “in the complex context of the Syrian civil war”, “has developed due skills of interacting with the population and cooperating with other movements. In addition, *Al-Nusra* ideologists closely follow the socio-political changes in Syria and pursue their policies in the context of changing trends and discourses” [7, p. 82].

While the world’s attention was almost entirely focused on the fight against ISIL in eastern Syria, Al-Qaeda “established its most powerful stronghold in north-western Syria,” taking complete control of Idlib province and a critical stretch of the Syrian-Turkish border, since July 2017, and, according to the US diplomat McGurk, the province of Idlib became “the largest safe haven for Al-Qaeda after 9/11” (11th September attacks on the United States. – Ed.) [8, p. 181].

DEMONSTRATIVE SPLIT WITH AL-QAEDA

ANF, against the backdrop of international blows on ISIL competing with it in the “jihadist field”, took a number of steps to change its image. It announced a formal split with Al-Qaeda, which caused sharp criticism of the “parent” terrorist network and a break with its supporters. In July 2016, ANF renamed itself for the first time, becoming *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* (“Levant Conquest Front”). In part, this was due to the pressure from other groups that reproached ANF that its engagement with the odious Al-Qaeda gave due grounds to Damascus and its allies to “label” all armed opposition in Syria as terrorists. The attempts of the world diplomacy to find political ways of solving the Syrian conflict enhanced the pressure of external actors on the armed opposition groups, which resulted factually in one thing: “all *Jabhat Al-Nusra*’s attempts to convince the opposition groups that complete organisational merger met their interests finally failed” [9, p. 2].

It is important to keep in mind that ANF’s formation and development took place at the time when Al-Qaeda itself was trending towards a strategy that was “more locally oriented” [10, p. 92]. Since the late 2000s, after the failures in Iraq, the international terrorist network created by Osama bin Laden began to revise its strategic vision – against the background of the Arab Spring-related transformations – towards more local orientation in order to

introduce its militants into the local socio-political context [10, p. 92].

The announcement of the dissolution of ANF and the formation of new *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* which was said to no longer have any “external ties” with Al-Qaeda was perceived by many analysts as a gimmick giving rise to reasonable suspicion that although al-Jolani “had formally severed its public relationship with Al-Qaeda the group would continue to maintain secret relationship with Al-Qaeda and make use of its strategic and operational guidance” [3]. As noted by a Syrian opposition journalist Al Kanj, “Ultimately, Nusra’s separation from Al-Qaeda, its parent group, became a straw that broke the camel’s back – because this action split *Al-Nusra Front* itself, with a group of Al-Qaeda supporters breaking away from the core group, while the others got reorganised into *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*. The breakaway ‘pro-Al-Qaeda’ group consisted mainly of members of the “Jordanian unit” loyal to Al-Qaeda’s leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri” [6].

The change of name and ANF’s declared break with Al-Qaeda can be regarded as an attempt of the group to keep balance with its jihadist supporters and to distance itself from the most odious global terrorist networks in order to survive. Hassan, an Islamism expert, notes that the nature of the rebranding is still a matter of debate among the analysts – their common opinion is that the group agreed with Al-Qaeda representatives in Syria to “publicly sever” the relations “while maintaining the secret oath of allegiance to al-Zawahiri” [1, p. 5].

NEW TRANSFORMATIONS

The disagreement between Al-Qaeda and *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham*, which appeared following the rebranding and which aims to heel the other armed opposition forces, led to a new transformation of the movement. *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham*’s attempts to merge with the Turkish- and Qatari-backed group *Ahrar al-Sham*, “which balances on a blurred line between the factually mainstream nationalist vision of Syria’s future and the Salafist-Jihadist component of the mutiny” [11, p. 17], was not successful. This is partly explained by *Ahrar al-Sham* leaders’ fear of losing external (primarily Turkish) support. As a result, both groups got engaged in a heated reciprocal conflict by January 2017, which was preceded by attacks of the former Nusra battlers in Idlib and western Aleppo against the forc-

es affiliated with another opposition force, “Free Syrian Army”.

The “unprecedented wave of inter-factional clashes” [9, p. 5] resulted in a distinct separation between *Ahrar al-Sham* and *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham*, each facing a series of splits and mergers. In this situation, the former ANF, renamed *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham*, got strengthened by merging with four other groups [9, p. 5]. In January 2017, *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* merged with a number of organisations to create the HTS coalition which declared itself to be an independent association not affiliated with Al-Qaeda or other groups listed as terrorist organisations in the United States.

The original constituent groups behind this merger along with *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* either have ideological orientation similar to this organisation (i.e. jihadists supporting Al-Qaeda), in the first place *Jabhat Ansar al-Din* or represent groupings that established common-aim relations or had been closely engaged with *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* and its predecessors for a long time [11, p. 19]. In October 2017, the ANF leader al-Jolani was referred to as the leader of HTS, which makes it obvious who “plays the first fiddle” in the new association of Islamist groups.

The apparent split from Al-Qaeda was exacerbated after another rebranding of *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham*, aimed to establish HTS; the former claimed to be “an independent entity that is not subordinate to any organisation, any party or Al-Qaeda or any other entity” [3]. According to Hassan, an expert on radical Islamism, the circumstances that took shape in Syria by early 2017, primarily Turkey’s military intervention in the north and the shrinkage of territory held by the armed opposition, “increased the pressure on *Jabhat al-Nusra* to make the group appear independent on Al-Qaeda” [1, p. 5].

At that stage, the statements and communications by Al-Qaeda leaders presented the newly formed group in Syria as “an independent Salafist-Jihadist organisation that illegally broke away from Al-Qaeda and violated the oath of allegiance”. A number of prominent jihadists quit HTS, publicly criticising it for sowing discord and breaking the oath of allegiance to the leader of Al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Zawahiri himself made several statements against the merger which was described by him as a “breach of agreement” that had failed to “achieve what they sought from the unity” and

which had never been sanctioned by Al-Qaeda's leadership [3].

The refusal of HTS to reverse its decision led to heightened tension between the group and the supporters of Al-Qaeda, which was reflected in the online war of words. The situation came to its peak after HTS held a major campaign of arresting field commanders loyal to Al-Qaeda in November 2017, including the arrest of Sami al-Uraydi, a Jordanian, a former Shariah leader of ANF, and his fellow, Ayad al-Tubasi (Abu Jalibib), one of the former ANF leaders [6].

As noted by the American researcher Lister, the prospects for Al-Qaeda's success in Syria in recent years have faced serious problems: "Al-Qaeda's claim to leadership over its Syrian allies rests on a very fragile foundation, if any at all. Instead, the formerly main ally of Al-Qaeda, *Jabhat al-Nusra*, undertook a series of rebranding acts in 2016–2017, which, though intended to achieve long-term goals, generated internal discord and factual break with Al-Qaeda instead" [9, p. 1].

Against that background, *Hurras ad-Din* ("Guardians of Religion Organisation") emerged in 2018 at the behest of al-Zawahiri, which is regarded as a new offshoot of Al-Qaeda in Syria.

The numerical strength of *Hurras ad-Din* is estimated to be around 2,000 fighters [6]. The group faces a number of problems, including a lack of funding and armament (the organisation has no centralised administrative structure, and its activities are scattered among small extremist groups in different parts of northern Syria). *Hurras ad-Din* is trying to attract foreign jihadists into its ranks, as well as local fighters who quit HTS.

Although formally HTS and *Hurras ad-Din* are not enemies, they occasionally compete over territories, weapons, and recruits. However, as noted by experts from the International Crisis Group, HTS not only shies away from confronting Al-Qaeda's offshoots (like *Hurras ad-Din*) but also coordinates its actions with this group in resisting the government forces [12].

HTS sustained a series of military operations during which it seized territories controlled by other rebel groups, which enables it to consolidate its power in northern Syria. In July 2017, HTS forces seized a considerable part of Idlib province after fighting with other groups, including their former allies from *Ahrar al-Sham*. HTS's relations with other anti-Assad forces take shape not in the best

way, to put it mildly. According to Haid, a *Chatham House* analyst, the group "has always presented itself as an indispensable armed force struggling against the Syrian regime, therefore the loss of significant territory (in 2018) within a short time came as a surprise to the locals and triggered a wave of accusations against HTS. The rebel groups and opposition representatives issued a statement accusing HTS of retreating from the held areas without furnishing any serious resistance".

A number of jihadist figures, including, for instance, one of the former ANF leaders, Saleh Al-Hamwi (also known as Muzamjer al-Sham), in fact accused HTS of sabotaging the armed opposition's efforts to counter the attacks of governmental forces. HTS militants were accused of withdrawing from the areas of operation without notifying the other groups they were fighting with, thus disrupting the insurgents' counterattacks.

In response, the HTS leader al-Jolani pounced on the factions that had signed the agreement on de-escalation of their rivals and held them responsible for HTS's territorial losses, claiming that the group he headed was the only resistance force, while the other opposition groups had abandoned the areas specified in the agreement. Al-Jolani claimed that HTS, faced with fierce attacks by pro-government forces, had no choice but to retreat in order to defend other areas [13].

HTS shares its influence in Idlib with the "National Front for Liberation", a coalition of motley groups created with the most active participation of Turkey [14, p. 72]. As Bibikova notes, "Turkey, supporting the National Front for Liberation, strives to weaken HTS, but evades from engaging in direct confrontation. According to French political scientists, Ankara tried in vain to make HTS break with the jihadist ideology and reunite with the National Front for Liberation: this way it could exert long-term pressure on Damascus by making Idlib region a Turkish protectorate to the north of Aleppo" [14, p. 73].

HTS' alleged ties with Turkey have become a key point of contention between the group and the hardline jihadists who view Ankara as an enemy that cannot be trusted. The fact that the group allowed Turkey to deploy its observation posts in Idlib, while its fighters escorted Turkish military patrols as part of a political deal in September 2017, reinforced jihadist hardliners' suspicions regarding HTS.

In order to allay its rivals' concerns about the group's growing influence and power, HTS announced that it would hand over the areas under its control to a civilian body. In October 2017, the so-called National Salvation Government was set up to manage the “liberated areas” in the north. The group critics believe that this “government” serves as a screen for HTS whose leaders try to create an appearance of legitimate and efficient authority in the areas occupied by it. In January 2019, HTS units unexpectedly seized a territory in Aleppo province, along with some key areas in northern Hama Governorate and a number of villages in southern Idlib, after resuming the fight with members of the Turkish-backed alliance, “National Front for Liberation”. Once again, the HTS group passed the administrative control hastily to the National Salvation Government.

“REBOOT” IN QUESTION

Despite the split between the militant jihadist organisations, a number of countries and the UN continue to regard HTS as an Al-Qaeda-affiliated group and often use its former name *Al-Nusra Front*. At the same time, HTS continues to issue jihadist slogans, which cannot but contribute to the doubts regarding the “reset” of this extremist group. Indeed, even assuming that the “divorce” between HTS and Al-Qaeda was not a tactical move and a result of a secret agreement between the two terrorist groups, the ideological affinity between them remains.

In doing so, HTS took advantage of the known benefits of a series of splits with the odious transnational terrorist network, by presenting itself primarily as a Syrian participant in the conflict. Commenting on the split between ANF and Al-Qaeda, a Russian scholar Krylov notes that the latter “has been always perceived in Syria as a foreign organisation adhering to the ‘world jihad’ ideology which has never had extensive popular support in the country, whereas the emergence of the in fact Syrian jihadist organisation was supported by a significant part of the Sunni population of Syria” [5, p. 658].

The group's deep “rootedness” in Syria and the focus primarily on the Syrian conflict served as one of the points of difference between ANF and its rival ISIL. The latter claimed global leadership and advocated the spread of militant jihadist activities far beyond Syria and Iraq. As noted by a Russian expert in Arab studies Matveev, “the concept of

‘popular jihad’ was a unique feature of *Tahrir al-Sham*, aimed at winning minds and hearts of ordinary people even before the establishment of the Islamic rule, although many Syrians did not distinguish between HTS and ISIL” [15, p. 254].

Unlike ISIL, ANF was not tailored to large-scale terrorist activities outside the region, including in Western countries (although at the initial stage ANF's propaganda materials contained invectives against not only the USA but also Turkey and the Arab League which were accused of “patronising the tyrannical regime” of Damascus) [10, p. 92].

Moreover, in an interview to Al Jazeera in 2015, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, the group leader, accusing the West of supporting the regime, stated that his organisation did not intend to attack “‘the distant enemy’ unless it was attacked by this enemy” (by external forces). However, this fact does not negate the extremist and terrorist nature of the group which widely practises all kinds of terrorist acts (blowing up cars by suicide bombers or through remote control, terrorist bombing at government and security forces deployment sites, laying roadside land mines, taking hostages, etc.) [5, p. 662]. In particular, it was the “direct descendant” of ANF, its new incarnation HTS, that claimed responsibility for the March 11, 2017 attack in the Old City in Damascus, which killed 76 civilians, including Shiite pilgrims from Iran [15, p. 254].

Even those observers who view the HTS changes implemented by Abu Mohammad al-Jolani as a potential foreshadowing of the group's survival as a political party similar to the HAMAS model in Palestine acknowledge that this does not mean that the group has become tolerant towards all its opponents or stopped “inhibiting” its critics [16]. HTS has its own security apparatus and courts on the territories controlled by the group, and rigorous restrictions are imposed on the local population (including in respect of opposition activists who had fled from other parts of Syria). Group ideology critics are arrested and executed. The 2020 reports on the act of hard-boiled execution by the group of a 19-year-old Syrian refugee Tano deported from Turkey, as accused of “blasphemy”, evidence of which was allegedly found in his mobile phone, caused quite a stir. However, Syrian activists claim that it was his phone messages, in which he privately criticised the militant leader, that were the reason for the execution.

POLITICAL MOVE

The much-publicised split between HTS and Al-Qaeda means more than a simple rebranding and the desire of the extremist group operating in Syria to distance itself as far as possible from the global terrorist network created by Osama bin Laden which has become a global bugbear since the early 21st century. It seems important for the leaders of HTS who are trying to assume the role of the main Islamist force in the armed confrontation in Syria to withdraw from the shadow of Al-Qaeda's headship and assert themselves as an independent and predominantly Syrian actor in the conflict.

According to Carenzi, "acceptance of transnational ambitions would likely jeopardise not only the political objectives of HTS, but also its very survival. As a consequence, prominent leaders and ideological figures tried to justify the group's potentially controversial choice, including its engagement with Turkey, from the doctrinal point of view. They pointed to the need to act in the interests of jihad and revolution, noting that jihad involves both permanence of principles and the ability to adapt to the strategic context" [10, p. 100].

In this case, it could also be a case of competition between Al-Qaeda and HTS, similar to the fierce rivalry that used to split ISIL and ANF. In both cases, however, the extremist groups' hostility to each other does not at all mean any fundamental difference in their terrorist orientation based on Salafist-Jihadist ideology.

On the other hand, the rivalling extremist forces in their propaganda widely use the accusation of their rivals' "insufficient" commitment to the ideas of jihad. The supporters of Al-Qaeda accuse HTS of abandoning the fundamental jihadist principles and secretly facilitating the Turkish plans in northern Syria.

Moreover, the HTS leaders' actions in fact show pragmatic, if not cynical, attempts to win sympathies at the foreign policy level.

In early 2021, the headquarters of HTS made one of its most noticeable attempts to demonstrate its "handshake", when its leader, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, granted an interview to an American journalist Smith in Idlib. To please the Western press, the jihadist organisation's leader appeared in a European suit. The public relations department of HTS did not conceal in its comments that the purpose of the interview was not only to convey the

group's views to the world but also to rid the organisation of its odious image.

Orabi Abdelhai Orabi, a Syrian journalist living in Turkey, remarked on the matter: "Jolani aims to create a political party that will play a significant role in Syria's future. In doing so, he wants to show that he has a due military force, that he is legitimate through the medium of the National Salvation Government, enjoys popularity – all this with the intention to gain international recognition" [17].

However, the attempt to "legitimise" HTS was not entirely successful (at least in a short term). On the one hand, it probably did not impress the US authorities as expected, which is evidenced by a sarcastic comment at the US State Department's *Twitter* page "Awards for Justice": "Hi Jolani the knockout, what a nice suit! You can change garments, but you'll always remain a terrorist. Don't forget about the \$10 million reward" [17]⁶.

As noted by al-Tamimi, a researcher of the *Middle East Forum* analytical centre, "despite some arguments of *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*'s supporters condemning the analysts who view the new group as the same old Al-Qaeda, there really do seem to be few differences" [11, p. 20].

The criticism of Jolani also came from another side, from jihadists who reminded the HTS leader how he had accused other Islamists who met Western media and maintained relations with the West, of behaving like "infidels".

However, the efforts to rebrand the terrorist group seem not to have been a complete failure. Still, there are calls from the Western expert community to revise the US policy towards HTS which had allegedly "broken with the transnational jihadist networks and now seeks to enter the realm of political participation in Syria's future" [18]. In particular, under the pretext of protecting the province of Idlib held by the armed opposition from offensives of the government forces, the *International Crisis Group* experts suggested that Washington should reconsider its position on retaining the status of HTS as a terrorist organisation, since this "precludes discussions with HTS on its behaviour and on the future of the territory controlled by it, given that the Western states and the UN are avoiding contacts principally, while Turkey is limiting itself to a minimum of con-

⁶ HTS group is recognised by the United States as a foreign terrorist organisation. In 2017, the US State Department announced a reward of up to \$10 million for the information identifying or establishing the location of Jolani.

tacts necessary to facilitate its military presence in Idlib. The poor liaising disrupts the ceasefire regime and prevents the external powers from bearing pressure on HTS in order to make the latter take further constructive steps” [18].

It is difficult to assess whether this view expresses naïve complacency deceived by jihadist propaganda ploys, or whether it represents a quite conscious attempt to “rehabilitate” the extremist group – not so much to include it in the political process and “prevent a humanitarian disaster” as to prevent the Syrian regime’s military advancement in the armed opposition-occupied Idlib province. There is hardly any need to explain how dangerous any steps by Washington to exclude HTS from the list of terrorist organisations could be for Syria, as well as for the entire region.

As viewed by the authors, the group’s change of “signboard” and its declared break with the most odious transnational terrorist networks does not mean the internal evolution of the militant group and its “regeneration” into a relatively restrained force, but serves as a political manoeuvre by HTS. This manoeuvre is aimed, for one thing, at reducing the threat from the international community and, if possible, at legitimising the group as an “agreeable” actor in the Syrian conflict and even as some kind of force that could serve as a counterweight to the abovementioned terrorist groups, let alone the struggle against Damascus regime. There appears to be a demand for such “services” in the West. It is worth remembering, for instance, that back in 2015, the former US CIA director, retired General Petraeus, expressed an idea, in a commentary to CNN, of using “some individual militants and possibly some elements” from *Jabhat al-Nusra* to fight against ISIL (and the government of Syrian President Assad). The US attitude toward HTS and its predecessors is not consistent: on the one hand, the group is recognised to be terrorist by US authorities, on the other hand, there is reason to believe that the USA occasionally try to get out its assailants of harm’s way, regarding them as an instrument in the fight against the Russian-backed Syrian authorities [19, p. 32].

It is in this context that the demonstrative efforts against ISIL and Al-Qaeda chapters in Idlib province should be regarded as aimed at external effect. In particular, in the spring of 2021, a series of arrests of figures connected with the pro-Al-Qaeda group *Hurras ad-Din* was continued. It should be noted as well that another important aspect of

the *Al-Nusra Front – Jabhat Fatah al-Sham – Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* transformation is banal competition between Islamist radical forces for influence and power in the areas of Syria held by the armed opposition.

“GLOCAL” STRATEGY

One can assume with a great deal of confidence that HTS is trying to follow the role-specific model of the Taliban⁷ in Afghanistan which has not abandoned its radical Islamist ideology, but was actively involved in the peace-making process during the Afghan conflict; having come to power in August 2021, it is trying to gain international recognition and cast off the stigma of a terrorist group. The involvement of Taliban representatives in negotiations of various levels held in different venues sets the stage for legitimisation of the group as the legitimate authority in Afghanistan. The potential removal of the terrorist designation label from HTS by Western countries is fraught with similar dangers. The Russian political scientist Serenko’s shrewd remark about the failure of attempts to “turn the ‘jihad cannibals’ into political vegetarians” within the framework of the Afghan settlement⁸ can also be applied to the situation with HTS.

Nevertheless, the extremists have not abandoned the attempts to change their image of an odious group for a more moderate one. Noteworthy are statements made by Jolani in February 2020 in an interview to the International Crisis Group [12]. The HTS leader explained in particular that the group headed by him was a purely localised group and had no interest in allowing Syria to be used for attacks outside it. As evidence of this, HTS staged demonstrational arrests of foreign fighters from Europe, as well as of the leaders of Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups such as *Khurras an-Din*, in order to split off from the other, more ideologically aggressive, groups. In this regard, it is revealing that the Afghan Taliban also urged their supporters to “avoid” involvement of foreign fighters in their ranks [20].

⁷ The movement Taliban was recognised as a terrorist organisation and banned on the territory of Russia by the resolution of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation of February 14, 2003.

⁸ The Afghan conflict is moving closer to Russia. The Taliban are striving to power after the disruption of the inter-Afghan settlement efforts. *Kommersant*, May 10, 2021. Available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4802838> (accessed 11.05.2021).

It would be appropriate to suggest that HTS can drift towards the trend of “ideological hybridisation within the jihadist landscape”, observed since the 2000s. According to the Italian researcher Carenzi, “the groups are increasingly resorting to mixed, ‘glocal’⁹ strategies combining local features and international ambitions, which blurs the theoretical and fuzzy distinction between the ‘near’ and ‘far’ enemy all the more” [10, p. 91]. This trajectory of HTS accentuates “the flexibility of jihadist groups and, above all, their ability to adapt to operational conditions, especially to local dynamics, that influence adoption of local, global, or glocally oriented strategies by the group” [10, p. 100].

The declared and even demonstrative abandonment by HTS of the “global jihad” ideas in favour

⁹ That is, combining global and local agendas.

of the “Syrian revolution” partly reflects the difficult military and political situation faced by the jihadist group trying to get rid of the pressure from the West and Turkey. However, there is a reason to believe that the group is not about to give up entirely its terrorist activities outside the Syrian conflict zone. At the same time, the poisonous seeds of extremist propaganda spread by its ideologists may sprout dangerously, inspiring potential HTS supporters outside Syria to engage in terrorist activities. This consideration can be supported, in particular, by April 2021 reports on Russian security services exposing a terrorist plot in Crimea inspired by HTS ideologists. As concerns this group, an old oriental saying “the snake changes its skin, but it does not change its temper” looks all the more relevant.

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“ХАЙЯТ ТАХРИР АШ-ШАМ” В СИРИЙСКОМ КОНФЛИКТЕ: МЕТАМОРФОЗЫ ТЕРРОРИСТИЧЕСКОЙ ГРУППИРОВКИ

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Одним из акторов вооруженного конфликта в Сирии остается экстремистская группировка “Хайят Тахрир аш-Шам” (ХТШ), контролирующая с рядом других вооруженных группировок территорию провинции Идлиб. Возникнув изначально как тесно связанная с террористической сетью “Аль-Каида”, организация “Фронт ан-Нусра” пережила в последние годы ряд трансформаций, которые были вызваны как внешними, так и внутренними факторами. Будучи последовательно верной джихадистским принципам, “Фронт ан-Нусра” (и ее инкарнации “Джебхат Фатах аш-Шам” (ДФШ) и “Хайят Тахрир аш-Шам”) на протяжении своей истории демонстрирует известную гибкость, стараясь приспособиться к изменениям конъюнктуры и широко используя инструменты “мягкой силы”. В статье анализируются причины ребрендинга группировки, пытающейся избавиться от одиозного имиджа в глазах не только сирийцев, но и международного сообщества. В частности, автор приходит к выводу о том, что ХТШ в своих попытках получить статус легитимного и договороспособного участника конфликта руководствуется примером движения “Талибан” в Афганистане. Есть признаки того, что выбранная ХТШ стратегия отчасти срабатывает – в западном экспертном сообществе раздаются призывы к ревизии политики США и их союзников по отношению к группировке ХТШ, которая якобы “порвала с транснациональными джихадистскими сетями и теперь стремится вступить в сферу политического участия в будущем Сирии”. Автор статьи выражает сомнения как в возможности сознательной эволюции ХТШ в более умеренное движение, так и в искренности декларируемого лидерами группировки отказа от повестки “глобального джихада”. Есть основания полагать, что полно-

стью отойти от террористической активности за пределами зоны сирийского конфликта группировка не собирается.

Ключевые слова: “Хайят Тахрир аш-Шам”, ХТШ, “Фронт ан-Нусра”, “Джабхат ан-Нусра”, “Джебхат Фатах аш-Шам”, Сирия, “Аль-Каида”, ИГИЛ, ИГ, “Исламское государство”, “Хуррас ад-Дин”, “Ахрар аш-Шам”, Идлиб, исламизм, джихадизм, экстремизм, “Талибан”.

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