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Redefining Global Jihad and Its Termination: The Subjugation of al-Qaeda by Its Former Franchise in Syria

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ABSTRACT

The globalization of jihad has proceeded in several stages from the mobilization against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s to Islamic State's current campaign. The end of global jihad is nonetheless less understood, including the conditions in which *jihadi* groups could reject al-Qaeda (AQ) or Islamic State (IS). This article examines this question through the trajectory of a former AQ franchise, *jabhat al-nusra* (JaN), that became *hay'at tahrir al-sham* (HTS) in 2017. This article argues that global jihad is not absolute. Global jihad exists on a spectrum of four inter-connected dimensions that can be disaggregated. In Syria, JaN was only partially globalist when it emerged. JaN's rejection of IS and AQ resulted from its opposition to their strategic objectives against the backdrop of the evolution of the Syrian conflict, which eroded JaN's globalism and made it particularly costly. This article is based on extensive field research and interviews with HTS's leadership in Idlib and other insurgents that have interacted with the group over the years.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani announced that his group was breaking its oath of allegiance (*ba'ya*) to al-Qaeda (AQ) in July 2016. The announcement was puzzling. JaN leaders insisted that the break-up was approved by AQ's central leadership, including the number three of the organization Abul-Khayr al-Masri. In the next four years, JaN clarified its relations to AQ as it transformed into *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS). HTS imposed strong conditions on remaining AQ loyalists that refused to sever their ties to Ayman al-Zawahiri's organization and regrouped into a new entity called *Hurras al-Din* (HaD). HTS conditioned HaD's range of activities before it subjugated the group militarily, seized its heavy weaponry and headquarters, and arrested its prominent commanders. In contrast with Islamic State's (IS) radical rupture with AQ, an AQ affiliate had now renounced its affiliation to a globalist group, established a technocratic government, and started to reach out to Turkey and Western countries.¹ This case-study questions existing understanding of global jihad, including its rationales, practicalities, and potential termination.

Research on global jihad has explored its multiple facets. Case studies of countries and groups analyze the rationale behind the adoption of a globalist agenda by some of them, especially in Egypt.² These cases expose the rationales and ramifications of

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AQ's franchising strategies,³ its practicality,⁴ and limits.⁵ Global jihad is associated with the resort to foreign fighters⁶ that contribute to new conflict framing,⁷ repertoires of violence such as suicide bombing,⁸ stronger organizational cohesion,⁹ and longer conflict duration and recurrence.¹⁰ The transformation of AQ after the destruction of its Afghan base contributed to its hybridisation¹¹ as local groups "glocalised" by mixing local and global objectives.¹² The main cases of substantial renouncement of jihad is the partial renunciation of violence by several groups that were loosely connected to AQ in Egypt and Libya,¹³ as well as their partial participation in parliamentary elections after 2011.¹⁴ But no group renounced an affiliation to AQ or IS before JaN's July 2016 proclamation in Syria.

The precedent set-up by JaN/HTS provides a unique understanding of how global jihad ends. Although several groups associated with AQ previously emphasized their local outlooks, it is the first time that a former AQ franchise explicitly severs its ties to the organization, subjugates AQ loyalists, and impose strict conditions on foreign fighters. This case-study has been hitherto presented empirically since many internal documents were widely leaked and published by HTS and AQ supporters¹⁵ to reconstitute the rupture step-by-step.¹⁶ A general consensus is that JaN forced the hand of AQ leaders¹⁷ and severed its oath of allegiance to AQ before creating a new group named HTS in alliance with other Syrian insurgents several months later. Text-based research on primary sources clarifies the standpoint of the main actors, but only a limited number of articles have tried to make sense of this evolution theoretically too.¹⁸

This article has two objectives. First, this research provides a rich empirical analysis of the rationale and practicalities of the rejection of global jihad by a former IS/AQ affiliate based on extensive field research and interviews with its leaders. Second, this article uses this case-study to re-conceptualise global jihad beyond existing approaches that rely primarily on the analysis of *jihadi* groups' ideological commitments. This article argues that global jihad exists (1) on a spectrum (2) of four interconnected dimensions that can be disaggregated. The definition of global jihad in relative terms helps to analyze insurgents that are only partially globalists, and measure the changing importance of globalism overtime. This article hence breaks down the constituting dimensions of global jihad to provide a nuanced approach of the de-transnationalisation of a former IS/AQ affiliate based on rich primary sources and interviews. This article JaN suggests that JaN was only partially globalist when it was established. JaN's rejection of IS and AQ resulted from its opposition to their strategic objectives against the backdrop of the evolution of the Syrian conflict, which eroded JaN's globalism and made it particularly costly.

This research is constructed as a structured within-case analysis of JaN as it transformed into HTS based on extensive field research and primary sources.¹⁹ This article defines four constitutive dimensions of global jihad to analyze the degree of JaN/HTS globalism before and after several turning points. This approach uncovers the causal processes underpinning JaN's evolution to delineate more precisely the succession of events that informed its strategic choices. This research is based on extensive field research conducted in Syria for the past few years. We interviewed the HTS leadership repeatedly, including the group leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, to understand the group's trajectory and political choices as it distanced itself from AQ. Field research

helped to gather HTS's perceptions beyond primary sources, and analyze how the group has been trying to position itself regionally and internationally. Field research was complemented by extensive interviews of other Syrian insurgents, including Islamists and non-Islamists, as well as independent actors to better contextualize HTS's changing positions over the years.

Redefining Global Jihad

The globalization of jihad has proceeded in different phases for the past four decades. Early jihadis in Egypt and Syria prioritized their willingness to establish Islamic states in their countries, although they also made references to the restoration of the Caliphate in the Muslim world. This position was famously articulated by the leader of the group that killed former Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, Abd al-Salam Faraj, on the necessity to prioritize the close as opposed to the far enemy (which was Israel, and not Western countries at the time).²⁰ Trans-national Muslim mobilization started in the 1980s to sustain the war effort against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The main ideologue Abdullah Azzam argued that jihad was an individual duty for able Muslims worldwide to protect Muslim land from foreign occupation.²¹ Mobilization for Afghanistan preceded other campaigns in the Balkans, Chechnya, Iraq, and Syria in the following decades.²² This phenomena accompanied the promotion of AQ's global agenda, which insisted that fighting domestic Muslim regimes would not liberate the Muslim world as long as these regimes remained supported by Western countries.²³ AQ's prioritization of the fight against the U.S. was not as popular as jihad against foreign occupation – including Chechnya – until 9/11. The two U.S.-led wars against Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11 transformed this dynamic. AQ transformed into a franchised alliance system as local groups started to affiliate with bin Laden's organization. A similar development occurred after 2014 when IS started to gather its own organizational affiliates in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.²⁴

One of the key conundrum of global jihad is the absence of a single distinctive feature. Global jihad cannot be reduced to the resort to violence – or simply its legitimization – against Western countries as a key strategic objective. Global jihad has overlapping meanings. The description of an armed group as “globalist”, or the end of globalism, exists with reference to contested features. This issue is not new. There have been numerous debates over the globalization of armed groups from the 1990s onwards. Were all the Arab groups in Afghanistan before 9/11 trans-national considering their interconnection with bin Laden's networks? Was a group like Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon, which professed an ideological affinity for al-Qaeda but without an official allegiance to the group, globalist? What about al-Shabaab in Somalia before 2011 or Lashkar al-Tayba in Pakistan? Is ideological proximity and the potential presence of veterans sufficient or necessary to be globalist? While some insurgents are clearly globalist in their objectives and armed activities – such as AQ Central – or not globalist – like Hamas in Palestine –, many groups are positioned in an intermediary spectrum. Their ambiguous positioning makes it more difficult to determine (1) their level of globalism and, more importantly, (2) how they can change within the intermediary – i.e. neither fully globalist or not globalist – spectrum.²⁵

This research dissociates four distinctive dimensions of global jihad. The first dimension of global jihad is allegiance (*ba'ya*) to AQ or IS. Pledging allegiance entails the adoption of the key strategic objectives of global jihad. A local group might abstain from targeting Western target, yet remain globalist by virtue of its allegiance to one of these groups. AQ and IS's franchising strategies expose the type of connection existing between these groups' core leaderships and their affiliates. Oaths of allegiance are widely debated. Some argue that these groups' core leadership provide strategic guidance to their affiliates and mid-level commanders. Strategy-making would be centralized, while execution could be de-centralized.²⁶ The other side of the argument states that affiliates and sympathizers mostly maintain a symbolic affiliation to the movement and that their actions are primarily guided by local dynamics.²⁷ The impact of allegiance changes in time and places. It ranges from some degree of command and control over these groups' affiliates to more symbolic affiliations reflected in a shared set of ideas and identification signals.²⁸

The second factor is ideological. Globalist groups share a congruent *salafi jihadi* ideology.²⁹ Ideology refers to "a more or less systematic set of ideas that includes the identification of a referent group [...], an enunciation of the grievances or challenges that the group confronts, the identification of objectives on behalf of that group [...], and a [...] program of action. Ideologies also prescribe [...] distinct institutions and strategies as the means to attain group goals"³⁰ Globalist groups embrace a common *salafi jihadi* ideology that structures their political strategy and rationales around opposition to Muslim regimes not applying their conception of Islamic law and Western countries admonished for supporting them. This ideology emphasizes the need to create Islamic states in the Muslim world, although this territorial dimension is stronger with IS than AQ for which it remains a long-term as opposed to an immediate objective. Jihadi *salafism* is informed by key theological concepts³¹ articulated by prominent ideologues that are not usually affiliated to specific armed groups.³² The *salafi jihadi* opposition to Western countries and the role of AQ also means that this ideology is widely perceived as an international threat, regardless of *salafi jihadi* groups' local behavior.

Two additional dimensions of global jihad are also found – to various degrees – in globalist groups. The first additional factor underpinning *jihadi* globalism is its modus operandi. *Salafi jihadi* groups develop a congruent program of action regardless of their contexts. Although several globalist modus operandi are shared with non-*jihadi* groups,³³ *salafi jihadi* groups widely use suicide bombings, mobilize foreign fighters, and tend to refrain from allying with non *salafi jihadi* groups, let alone foreign states. They attack domestic targets associated with state authorities, religious minorities, and civilian places in addition to international objectives (including foreign hostages, embassies, and international institutions). In practice, *salafi jihadi* groups that rule local population tend to apply a local governance described as "ideological, internationalist, territorially expansive, and irredentist", including the application of Islamic penalties (including public corporal punishments referred to as the *hudud*).³⁴

The second additional dimension of *jihadi* globalism is these groups' interconnect- edness. *Jihadi* groups form a broader social movement defined as "(1) informal net- works, based (2) on shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilize about (3) conflictual

The four dimensions of global jihad	
Oath of allegiance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oath of allegiance (<i>ba'ya</i>) to AQ or IS • Diverging levels of command and control
Ideology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opposition to Muslim regimes and Western countries that support them. • Creation of local Islamic states
Modus operandi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resort to suicide bombings and foreign fighters • Domestic targets associated with religious minorities and civilians • International targets • Harsh local governance
Interconnectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Networks of militants involved in previous campaigns of jihad, especially in Afghanistan

issues, through (4) the frequent use of various forms of protest.³⁵ Successive waves of *jihadi* mobilization from Afghanistan onwards created interconnected networks of individuals, entrepreneurs, and groups.³⁶ Despite personal, tactical, and strategic divergences,³⁷ these networks have structured the strategic debate on jihad and its practicalities, and provided a base of support that *jihadi* groups can rely upon for resources (ideational and material). It makes them more innovative and capable of developing new ideas and repertoires of violence.³⁸ Reliance on external instead of local support help *jihadi* groups withstand more losses and fight longer than other groups.³⁹ It can make them more durable and able to regroup elsewhere after the termination of specific conflicts.⁴⁰ Interconnected *jihadi* groups also maintain more durable alliances,⁴¹ which help them withstand state repression.

Global jihad therefore features four main dimensions that are mutually constitutive. These dimensions might be only partially present depending on the context.

The Globalism of JaN

The within-case study analysis begins with the establishment of JaN, and the extent to which the group could be described as globalist along the four dimensions of global jihad when it emerged. The first few years of JaN's existence illustrates that global jihad exists on a spectrum, even for a group that was once presented as the most successful AQ affiliate worldwide.

A few key elements of JaN's trajectories have to be mentioned without undertaking an extensive retrospective already available in primary and secondary sources.⁴² According to Jolani and Abu Abdullah al-Shami, HTS's respective leader and highest religious figure, the idea behind the creation of JaN was proposed by Jolani in 2011 to the leader of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI)⁴³ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.⁴⁴ Jolani wanted to support the militarization of the Syrian uprising and asked financial and military support to ISI to create a new group.⁴⁵ Jolani and his early associates insisted that they opposed a repetition of the Iraqi experience, which featured excessive violence against the civilian population. JaN was established in 2012 before spreading throughout Syria in interconnected network of militants that started to mobilize around them. The group was de facto independent in its decision making. Jolani mentioned the existence of early tensions with ISI as he refused to follow several orders from the Iraqi leadership including ISI's demands that JaN orchestrate armed attacks against the mainstream Syrian opposition in Istanbul.

JaN featured parts of the four dimensions of global jihad when it emerged by 2012. First, JaN had an allegiance to a globalist group. JaN was created with the support of ISI according to Jolani himself. JaN was indirectly subordinated to AQ through ISI's own allegiance to the organization. JaN's allegiance to AQ only became direct and explicit when Jolani announced its separation from ISIS in 2013 by pledging direct allegiance to al-Zawahiri. The allegiance had ambiguous implications. Jolani and his associates argued that AQ never provided any financial or military support, and even consented to JaN's insistence that it would not be embroiled in foreign attacks. Jolani argued that there were only a few exchanges of letters between the two groups. It is true that it would have been difficult for AQ to impose strong command and control on JaN considering that its leadership was far, isolated, and with limited resources. Abul-Harith al-Masri, a former leader of al-Zawahiri's original group the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, insisted that Zawahiri was not able to lead the battle from far away.⁴⁶ JaN's highest religious authority, Abu Abdullah al-Shami, additionally revealed that each exchange of letter would take three months to be sent to Zawahiri, and three months to return.⁴⁷ The allegiance to AQ was paradoxical. It strategically endeavored to maintain JaN's internal cohesion after splitting with IS, although AQ did not provide direct assistance or financial support to the group. The AQ allegiance had therefore more to do with branding than submission to an external entity.

The second dimension of global jihad featured in JaN as well. JaN was *salafi jihadi* since its early days. Although the group defined itself only as a "front of support" to the Syrian uprising, the group's early communiqués were published on pro-AQ online forums. They publicized JaN's commitments to key ideological tenets of *jihadi* salafism, including the establishment of an Islamic state in Syria and opposition to Western countries. This ideological affiliation was confirmed by a prominent religious authority of the group at the time, Sami al-Uraydi, a close associate of the *salafi jihadi* scholar Abu Muhammad al-Maqdissi, in a long interview published in 2013.⁴⁸ Although JaN insisted that it did not excommunicate the population and denounced the most radical tendencies that plagued *salafi jihadi* groups in Iraq, the ideological affiliation to *jihadi* salafism was not contested. JaN developed a dual ideological and political standpoints on religious minorities. In a televised interview, Jolani blamed Alawi political support for the regime yet also insisted that they should amend their theological beliefs too.⁴⁹ At the same time, JaN did not plan to attack Western countries. In contrast with AQ's guidelines on jihad,⁵⁰ Jolani affirmed in public and private interviews that the group never planned to attack Western countries, and that it only targeted the regime and its local allies. Despite JaN's public commitment to *jihadi* salafism, the group only partially applied its program of action.

Third, JaN adopted several modus operandi of *jihadi* salafism. The group initially became renown for orchestrating suicide bombing against regime targets, including several explosions in the capital Damascus. JaN's small-scale mobilization in interconnected networks of militants followed a broader mobilization of foreign fighters as the conflict transformed into a fight for territorial control. JaN was not initially involved in governance independently, as it preferred to join shared courts with other insurgents.⁵¹ JaN was perceived very differently from IS locally, since it sought to nurture popular support while avoiding antagonizing the population. In 2015, the group created its own systems of court system under the name *dar al-qada'*. Although JaN's courts did

not resort to large-scale publicized executions like IS, they occasionally implemented some corporal legal punishments associated with the *hudud* in Islamic law, such as death penalty for blasphemy, fornication, and homosexuality.⁵² The group later claimed that it would set-up an emirate in North West Syria in a leaked audio tape,⁵³ although JaN's leaders later argued that it was just a speech and did not represent an immediate project. On the other hand, JaN did not orchestrate armed activities against Western countries. The group also willingly collaborated with many other local groups not aligned with *jihadi* salafism.

The interconnectedness of JaN to globalist networks evolved overtime. As mentioned previously, the group was initially formed by IS commanders connected to militant networks in Syria, including former prisoners.⁵⁴ Some of them, including the Jordanian Abu Julaybib, were close to the leader of IS's predecessor, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, and were already in Afghanistan when 9/11 occurred. Other widely connected leaders include Sami al-'Uraydi, JaN's highest religious authority in 2014, and Abu Firas al-Suri, an AQ veteran already active in the late 1980s in Afghanistan. The split from IS in 2013 had paradoxical effects. On the one hand, many foreign fighters left the group for IS. JaN hence became organically more Syrian as a result. Yet this development also accompanied the incidental arrival of AQ-linked individuals in Syria. Some of them were described by the U.S. as members of a sub-group called Khorasan, which would have been planning foreign attacks from Syria.⁵⁵ JaN denied the existence of Khorasan as an organized group, and a credible argument is that these individuals would have been sent by AQ to maintain the loyalty of JaN commanders to the organization.⁵⁶ In any case, JaN became more interconnected to AQ's core leadership. The number three of AQ, Abul-Khayr al-Masri, came to Syria and started to coordinate with the organization against the backdrop of a prisoner exchange between Iran and AQ. Another historical figure, Abu Farraj al-Masri, also figured prominently in the group. Most AQ-associated veterans would nonetheless be killed in drone strikes by the U.S. between 2014 and 2016.

The globalism of JaN was therefore ambiguous since the beginning. JaN was created by a former IS commander who pledged allegiance to AQ, but acted independently

The globalism of JaN	
Oath of allegiance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created by a network of IS commanders • Symbolic allegiance to AQ from 2013 onwards
Ideology	<p>Limits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No command and control from AQ Central • Adoption of the <i>salafi jihadi</i> ideology
Modus operandi	<p>Limits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejection of foreign operations • Resort to suicide bombers and foreign fighters • Forms of local governance
Interconnectedness	<p>Limits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No active operational planning against foreign targets • Collaboration with non <i>salafi jihadi</i> groups • Presence of AQ commanders and leaders <p>Limits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successive killings of AQ veterans

in practice. JaN additionally embraced the *salafi jihadi* creed and resorted to several modus operandi that are usually associated with it, including the resort to suicide bombing, foreign fighters, and some forms of local governance. Although the group never openly planned foreign attacks, it was interconnected to AQ networks though a systematic wave of U.S.-led assassination eroded this connection overtime. JaN was quite typical of other hybrid groups that are associated with globalist networks, even when their objectives are primarily domestic.

Why Did JaN Reject AQ?

In a second phase of evolution, JaN rejected AQ and global jihad. This decision did not occur in a vacuum. JaN opposed IS and AQ's strategic decisions, especially the isolationism and extreme violence of IS that JaN denounced as a heretical group (*khawarij*), and AQ's foreign agenda. This strategic opposition was reinforced by the evolution of the Syrian conflict, which eroded the four dimensions of transnationalism and made JaN's allegiance to AQ particularly costly.

The rejection of global jihad officially occurred in July 2016 when JaN became *jabha fath al-sham* (the Front for the Liberation of the Levant) as it severed its ties to AQ. The change of name only meant to emphasize the rupture with AQ. The subsequent formation of HTS in January 2017 conversely sought to unite all the armed opposition to the regime. As mentioned earlier, the rupture was ambiguous since it was rationalized by AQ leader al-Zawahiri's claims that allegiance to AQ should not take precedence over the interests of the Syrian uprising. This step was initially sanctioned by AQ's third in command, Abul-Khayr al-Masri, who was in Syria at the time.⁵⁷ A close associate of al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian Abu Farraj, was also present in the press conference in which Jolani announced that his group would no longer be subordinated to any other entity.

The main issue concerns the severed allegiance. JaN's allegiance to AQ remained mostly symbolic from 2013 to 2016. JaN never obtained material benefits from its affiliation to Zawahiri's organization, although the oath of allegiance contributed to JaN's survival when it split from IS in 2013. AQ never controlled the actions of its Syrian affiliate. JaN's approach to the conflict remained informed by its own political preferences and changing local dynamics over the years. The affiliation had nonetheless become increasingly costly by 2016. Although JaN insisted that it was not pursuing foreign operations and believed in the primacy of Syria, the affiliation to AQ became detrimental on two fronts. First, many other insurgents were reluctant to ally with JaN as long as the allegiance to AQ remained. That was particularly the case of the other major Islamist armed group in the North West, Ahrar al-Sham (AaS). AaS and other insurgents feared that allying with JaN could threaten them and legitimise their own listing as terrorist organizations, which they had hitherto manage to prevent.⁵⁸ Second, JaN's affiliation to AQ justified increased military operations by Russia and the Syrian regime, as well as the U.S. administration. JaN was excluded from ceasefire initiatives and many of its prominent leaders and commanders were repeatedly targeted by both sides of the conflict.⁵⁹ The contradictions between the interests of the Syrian jihad and AQ had become only more obvious over the years.

The ideological dimension of JaN's globalism did not substantially shape its willingness to dissociate from AQ. JaN had not substantially evolved ideologically by 2016. The group still broadly embraced the same objectives, including the creation of an Islamic state in Syria, and expressed antagonistic views on foreign countries. JaN had been notably wary of other groups' relations to the U.S., and to Turkey. Without openly excommunicating the groups that collaborated with Turkish forces in the North of Syria, JaN was reluctant to ally with them.

The two additional dimensions of global jihad started to weaken as well. First, JaN's *modus operandi* started to change by 2016. While the group still resorted to suicide bombing against regime targets, it was becoming increasingly more similar to other – non *salafi jihadi* – insurgents. Suicide bombings were justified instrumentally – based on their military efficiency – more than ideologically. Foreign fighters were also less dominant as most of them had previously departed for IS, or died in combat. The insurgency, including JaN, was instead becoming more local. In addition, the evolution of the conflict emphasized the necessity to unite the armed opposition to the regime. By 2016, the insurgency had lost most territory previously under control, as well as Aleppo in the North. The North West was its main remaining stronghold, which means that the preservation of what remained of the armed opposition imposed its unification in the same organizational umbrella to sustain the war effort. Previous attempts to unite the insurgency had only had a limited impact in the Idlib province. Insurgent-led initiative efforts, from the 2014 summer initiative to the operation room *jaysh al-fath*, had not united the insurgency. By the end of 2016 and beginning, the main *modus operandi* of JaN/HTS were becoming increasingly less differentiated from other local insurgents.

The interconnectedness of JaN to globalist networks was also eroding by 2016 and 2017. Most prominent AQ veterans were successively killed by U.S. drones over the years, which contributed to the transformation of JaN's leadership. Veterans had spent decades fighting jihad in other countries, from Afghanistan to Iraq, and shared strong ties and ideological alignment. Their targeted assassination, wittingly or not, contributed to the Syrianisation of JaN's leadership around Jolani. Jolani's associates did not share the trajectory of AQ veterans. Although some had been involved in the Iraqi conflict, they were usually new comers to the *jihadi* movement. Their shared experience with other veterans was limited. They had a more local outlook focused on the Syrian conflict despite their ideological leanings. Most remaining AQ veterans, or individuals associated with them, would ultimately reject Jolani's rupture with AQ and refuse to join HTS in January 2017.⁶⁰

JaN was therefore becoming less globalist by 2016. Without substantial ideological revisions, the group started to resemble non-AQ insurgents similarly active in Syria. It became more local in *modus operandi* as well as tactical and strategic objectives. The role of veterans in trans-national networks also started to erode as the U.S. administration continued to successively kill them in drone attacks. JaN's allegiance to AQ, which was publicized in a particularly threatening time for the group as it split from its Iraqi patron, became increasingly costly. It no longer had direct benefits, but was becoming a major obstacle to the unification of the province.

The rationales of JaN's rupture with AQ	
Oath of allegiance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No clear material benefits • Heavy cost
Ideology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No substantial ideological change.
Modus operandi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasingly similar to other local insurgents, and less <i>salafi jihadi</i> specific
Interconnectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eroding role of AQ veterans • Increased Syrianisation of JaN's leadership

The Rejection of Globalism and the Subjection of AQ

By 2021, five years have passed since JaN/HTS rejected AQ. These five years confirm that the rejection of global jihad was real. More importantly, this time-frame confirms the erosion of the four dimensions of transnationalism and illustrates the transformation of JaN as it became HTS.

The establishment of HTS in January 2017 marked a real transformation of the group, and a firm distancing from global jihad. Most analyses of JaN and HTS's transformation focus on the internal debates between HTS and AQ figures, and on the subsequent confrontation that occurred between HTS and AQ-affiliated networks.⁶¹ The most interesting developments nonetheless occurred outside a sole focus on these short-term developments. While the group's rejection of globalism was only partial before the creation of HTS, several strategies adopted subsequently illustrate its new commitments to normalizing itself.

The first dimension concerns HTS's allegiance to globalist groups. After the rupture with AQ, HTS imposed strict conditions on its remaining supporters. Pro-AQ individuals created a new insurgent group, *Hurras al-Din* (HaD), which was widely perceived as the new local AQ affiliate. HTS successively subjugated and nearly eliminated the group in two steps. First, HTS explicitly forbade this group from having its own courts of justice and check points, and from engaging in foreign operations.⁶² Then, when HaD allied with smaller groups in 2020 to substantiate its opposition to HTS's rapprochement with Turkey, HTS cracked down on the group, seized its heavy weaponry and headquarters, and forbade it from operating in North West Syria.⁶³ Meanwhile, HTS continued its comprehensive crackdown on IS cells throughout the Idlib province, whose members were systematically arrested and occasionally executed.

Other substantial changes occurred ideologically. In theory, HTS has not officially renounced many key ideological tenets, including the rejection of democracy, secularism, and willingness to implement Islamic law. Yet HTS has decisively distanced itself from *jihadi* salafism on several important fronts. First, the group has actively institutionalized religious authority to re-localise itself, gain local acquiescence, and sever the influence of foreign *salafi jihadi* intellectuals. The institutionalization of religious authority has allowed the group to prevent internal dissidence on politically sensitive issues, including the group's growing rapprochement with Turkey. It was also used to limit the impact of many *salafi jihadi* concepts, such as excommunication (*takfir*) and the so-called loyalty to the believer and enmity for the disbeliever (*al-wala wal-bara*), which are not renounced in theory but not implemented in practice.⁶⁴ The texts of key *salafi jihadi* theologians such as Abu Muhammad

al-Maḡdissi were also forbidden in the group's training camp, before the publication of a public communiqué that denounced him explicitly.⁶⁵ HTS has instead returned to the classical schools of jurisprudence (*maddhab*) to consolidate the ideological distancing from *jihadi* salafism.

The two additional features of global jihad have also changed. HTS's transformation affected its *modus operandi*. Domestically, the group has promoted the establishment of a technocratic government, the Salvation Government that is officially independent from the group, although it depends on Jolani's group support in practice. The Salvation Government remains authoritarian and adverse of political dissent.⁶⁶ But is a substantial different from the court system usually promoted by *salafi jihadi* groups, which are characterized by their ideological nature and harsh governance.⁶⁷ The Salvation Government is largely transactional. It has delegated large parts of its prerogatives to other domestic and international actors.⁶⁸ It does not impose the minority status to religious minorities such as the Christians, who do not have to pay the tax (*jiziyya*) imposed by *salafi jihadi* actors on minorities. Internationally, HTS has increasingly accepted the necessity to nurture ties to foreign countries, which it wants to transform into a strategic relation.⁶⁹ This is a major departure from accepted *salafi jihadi* practices. Last, HTS has evolved militarily. The structure and *modus operandi* of most local military brigades can mostly be differentiated along their degree of organization and professionalism more than any ideological specificity. Most large groups participate in a shared military operation room that is increasingly tied to Turkey, and could possibly transform into a united military council in the future. More importantly, the institutionalization of military work has helped HTS marginalize and control most foreign fighters within its own ranks as well as outside of it. Foreign fighters do not represent an independent center of power within HTS. Only the foreign fighters that accept the group's strategic direction remain in the group. Moreover, foreign-led groups cannot operate independently but have to submit to HTS's lead.

There are no remnants of HTS's past interconnectedness to globalist networks. Most former leaders and commanders associated with these network were killed before the transformation of JaN into HTS, and those who survived refused to join HTS in opposition to Jolani's new decisions. Their actions were subsequently restricted, as mentioned earlier. Other foreigners that are not linked to AQ but still opposed Jolani's new choices, including several Egyptian ideologues, were similarly marginalized and pursued by HTS.

The creation of HTS by JaN confirms the group's transformation, and its rejection of the four dimensions of global jihad. Although HTS remains committed to the establishment of an Islamic state in theory, the group has in practice rejected the implementation of key *salafi jihadi* ideological concepts, transformed its *modus operandi*, and repressed AQ and IS members. The Salvation Government that HTS has promoted for the past few years instead strives to appear as a technocratic government that collaborates with international organization and seeks to coordinate with Western countries as well. While HTS and its supported government remain authoritarian, these entities have effectively left the fold of global jihad and become closer to the practice of armed groups associated with the Muslim Brotherhood like Hamas in Palestine, despite real remaining ideological divergences.

	The rejection of global jihad and subjugation of AQ
Oath of allegiance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No more allegiance to AQ • Interdiction to AQ supporters from operating locally
Ideology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued rejection of democracy and secularism and commitment to Islamic law • Institutionalization of religious authority to reject <i>jihadi</i> salafism and its ideologues
Modus operandi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-implementation of key <i>salafi jihadi</i> concepts • Technocratic government • No open discrimination of religious minorities • Constraints on foreign fighters • Standardized military practices
Interconnectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No more interconnection to globalist networks • Repression of AQ supporters • Exclusion of dissident foreigners and foreign fighters

Conclusion

Global jihad exists along a spectrum of four interrelated dimensions. It exists formally – when oaths of allegiance are given to globalist groups –, ideologically, in modus operandi, and interconnectedness. These dimensions are partially overlapping and complementary. Differentiating them gives a more adequate understanding of what globalism means as well as its practical implications. This research suggests that, while some groups are decisively globalist, many others like JaN exist in the middle of the spectrum. Differentiating several dimensions of globalism is therefore necessary to determine in detail how armed groups can evolve in these circumstances.

JaN was never fully globalist. JaN was created by IS veterans who were partially connected to AQ and its supporting networks. The group's leadership never planned foreign attacks against Western targets since it prioritized Syria since the beginning. At the same time, the group publicized its allegiance to AQ in 2013. Many of its prominent leaders and commanders who joined the group between 2012 and 2016 had a history of involvement in global jihad. JaN also implemented many modus operandi that are characteristic of globalist groups.

JaN/HTS renounced global jihad in line with the evolution of the Syrian conflict. The group increasingly Syrianised and resembled non *salafi jihadi* insurgents as the conflict evolved. This evolution paralleled JaN's acknowledgement of the cost of its allegiance to AQ, which underpinned many targetted attacks against its leaders and commanders but also prevented the unification of the Syrian armed opposition. HTS's renouncement of global jihad occurred through a multi-faceted process of institutionalization. The group promoted the establishment of a technocratic government that rules the population. Governance is authoritarian, but not particularly ideological. HTS has additionally strived to embed itself locally by institutionalizing religious authority to reassert religious control, gain local legitimacy, and take distance from *jihadi* salafism.

This case study offers several lessons beyond Syria. First, de-transnationalisation is difficult because of the overlapping dimensions of global jihad. JaN leader al-Jolani could not sever his ties to AQ on a whim. While he used the allegiance to AQ to maintain the loyalty of its commanders and the cohesion of his group when the split with IS occurred, severing the allegiance with AQ was a lengthy process. Jolani had to maintain internal consensus through negotiations with other commanders in order to prevent their departure. The interconnection of some of them to globalist networks, and their ideological identification with them, complicated the process. It took several

years for Jolani to split from AQ and successfully subjugate renegade commanders that remained faithful to the organization. Second, this case study suggests that ideological change started only after severing ties to the organization and not before. Remaining interconnected to globalist networks, and the existence of an oath of allegiance, prevented significant ideological change although JaN was already quite singular in its localism beforehand.

De-transnationalisation is informed by the nature of contemporary armed conflicts. A common argument suggests that insurgents had clear incentives to join AQ in the 2000s, as it fitted their organizational and strategic interests.⁷⁰ The situation changed after 2011. Western countries no longer oppose political change in the Middle East, either nonviolent as in Egypt and Tunisia or through insurgency in Libya and Syria. They cannot be considered local regimes' ultimate protectors, which ultimately underpinned AQ's choice to target them. Western countries are also willing to accommodate some Islamist insurgents as long as they are not connected to AQ or IS. It is therefore no longer in Islamist groups' long-term strategic interests to align with AQ or IS.

The question therefore remains whether other groups, including in the Sahel and Somalia, can replicate HTS's example. Renouncing globalist jihad is not easy since armed groups' leaders have to maintain the cohesion of their groups while re-orientating their strategic direction. Being interconnected to globalist networks and ideologically committed to their world-views can present real internal obstacles to a substantial alteration of their strategic calculus. Western countries therefore have a role to play in favoring this outcome, through limited and conditional engagement that presents a way out of global jihad.

Notes

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16. See also Jerome Drevon & Patrick Haenni, "How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads"; Charles Lister, "Al-Qaida's complex balancing act in Syria," *Perspectives on terrorism* 11, no. 6 (Deceber 2017): 122-129; Aymen Jawad al-Tamimi, "From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: Evolution, Approach and Future," *Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung/ Al-Nahrain Center For Strategic Studies* (2018): 10-11.
17. Only one article claims otherwise, against all evidence: Antonio Giustozzi, "A struggle for power: Al Nusra and Al Qaida in Syria," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 44, no. 1 (August 2020): 1-25.
18. For an exception, see Silvia Carenzi, "A Downward Scale Shift? The Case of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 6 (December 2020): 91-105.
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21. On Azzam's role, see Thomas Hegghammer, *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
22. Byman, *Road warriors*.
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27. E.g. Marc Sageman, *Leaderless jihad: Terror networks in the twenty-first century*, (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

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30. Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Ideology in civil war: Instrumental adoption and beyond," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 213-226.
31. For instance *al-wala' wal-bara'*, *al-hakimiyya*, the understanding of *tawheed*. See e.g. Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The history of an idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
32. Most prominently Abu Muhammad al-Maqqdissi and Abu Qatada, who are based in Jordan.
33. The Kurdish PKK, for instance, also resorts to foreign fighters and suicide bombings.
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36. Marc Sageman, *Understanding terror networks* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania press, 2011).
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40. Ahmad, "Going global."
41. Christopher W. Blair, Erica Chenoweth, Michael C. Horowitz, Evan Perkoski, and Philip BK Potter, "Honor Among Thieves: Understanding Rhetorical and Material Cooperation Among Violent Nonstate Actors," *International Organization* (2020): 1-40.
42. For primary testimonies, see <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/interview/abu-mohammad-al-jolani/>, A. Atun, 2016. ta'sis jabhat al-nusra wa ahdath al-sham min bidayat al-khilaf ila 'ilan al-dawla. For secondary sources, see Jennifer Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra in Syria* (Washington D.C.: Institute for the Study of War, 2014); Charles Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2016); Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic state and the evolution of an insurgency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Mohamed-Ali Adraoui, "The case of Jabhat Al-Nusra in the Syrian conflict 2011–2016: Towards a strategy of nationalization?," *Mediterranean Politics* 24, no. 2 (2019): 260-267.
43. Islamic State or IS was known as Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) in 2012, Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) in 2013, and finally Islamic State in 2014.
44. Interviews conducted in Idlib in 2019, 2020, and 2021.
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46. The source is also referred in Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (IV), *Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi's Blog*, accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2017/10/the-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-a-l-qaeda-dispute-primary-3>.

47. Interview in Idlib.
48. Aron Y. Zelin, “al-Manarah al-Bayda Foundation for Media Production presents a new video message from Jabnah al-Nusrah: “Our Manhaj and Our Aqidah: A Meeting with Dr. Sami al Aridi”, *Jihadology*, accessed February 1 2022, <https://jihadology.net/2013/10/21/al-manarah-al-bay%e1%b8%8da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhah-al-nu%e1%b9%a3rah-our-manhaj-and-our-aqidah-a-meeting-with-dr-sami-al-aridi/>.
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50. Cerwyn Moore, “General Guidelines for the Work of Jihad: September 2013 By Ayman al-Zawahiri,” in *Al-Qaeda 2.0*, ed. David Holbrook (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 51-58.
51. Regine Schwab, “Insurgent courts in civil wars: the three pathways of (trans) formation in today’s Syria (2012–2017),” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29, no. 4 (2018): 801-826.
52. See some examples in Aymen Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of Jabhat al-Nusra Dar al-Qaḍa Documents”, *Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi’s Blog*, accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/03/archive-of-jabhat-al-nusra-dar-al-qaa-documents>.
53. The audio is still available on the following page: <https://archive.org/details/AmaraJulani>
54. Islamist prison leaders nonetheless claim that most Islamist prisoners joined other groups, especially Ahrar al-Sham, and not JaN or IS.
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57. Pro-AQ accounts claim that Abul-Khayr would have changed position later on, which is difficult to confirm since he was killed by an American drone soon after.
58. Interviews with AaS’s leadership.
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61. See notes 15 and 16.
62. Interview with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani and Abul-Hassan 600 (HTS’s military commander). See also Drevon & Haenni, “How Global Jihad Relocalises”.
63. *Ibid.*
64. *Ibid.*
65. Syria TV, tahrir al-sham tatabara min “al-maqdissi” wa tasifo bi “muthir al fitan” <https://www.syria.tv/2020نننفل-ريشمب-فصتو-يسدقملا-نم-أربتت-مأشلا-ريرحت/>.
66. Ravina Shamdasani, “Press Briefing Note on Syria: Idlib Violations and Abuses,” *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, last modified 20 November, 2020, <https://bit.ly/36WPIuq>.
67. Lia, “Understanding jihadi proto-states.”
68. Drevon & Haenni, “How Global Jihad Relocalises”.
69. Interviews with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani and Abu Abdullah al-Shami. See also Drevon & Haenni, “How Global Jihad Relocalises”.
70. See note 5.

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