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The end of Jihadi Salafism? The religious governance of HTS, the Post-Jihadi rebel ruler in Northern Syria

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ABSTRACT
Jihadis differentiate themselves from other Muslims by their demand for an Islamic state based on their interpretation of Islamic law as well as their legitimization of violence against Muslim domestic regimes and, occasionally, Western countries for supporting them. Over the past decade, they have increasingly governed civilians with harsh governance featuring physical punishments and discriminatory measures against women and religious minorities. But this is not always the case. In Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a former affiliate of Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda previously known as Jabhat al-Nusra, took on a very different governing role in the northwest of the country. In contrast to other Jihadis, HTS has distanced itself from its Jihadi legacy after seizing power. As the group relocalised, it has established new structures of governance that are more technocratic than ideological though they feature religion too. This paper analyses HTS's policies, from its rejection of its Jihadi legacy to the group's understanding of Islamic law and interactions with local communities, including religious minorities. This article is based on extensive research conducted in northwest Syria, including numerous interviews with the HTS leadership, its supported government, other armed groups, and civil society organizations.

Introduction

In 2022, a video portrayed Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, a former commander of Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) (which later became Islamic State in Iraq and Sham or ISIS in 2013 and then simply Islamic State or IS in 2014) and current leader of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra), visiting the Druze

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population in the Idlib province of Syria under armed opposition group control. A Druze leader insisted that the community had converted to Islam but al-Jolani, in an unusual move, told them that there was no compulsion in religion and that their conversion to Islam was not necessary (Dugheim, 2022). Jolani later added that the promotion of virtue (*hisba*) through a special police, as in Saudi Arabia in the past, had negative outcomes and should not be implemented in the areas under his control (Ibrahim, 2023). These quotes were startling, particularly from a group that previously affiliated to ISIS and then al-Qaeda. Yet they highlight the unique approach of HTS, the group that currently rules the province of Idlib in north west Syria. Unlike other Jihadis, HTS has promoted a technocratic form of governance through the creation of the Syrian Salvation Government, which contrasts to the harsh rulings that are commonly associated with Jihadi Salafism and its 'ideological, internationalist, territorially expansive, and irredentist' features (Lia, 2017). This sets HTS apart from all other Jihadis, since this pragmatic and less ideological approach to governance has virtually no precedent among these actors.[1]

These developments further evidence that HTS has moved away from jihadism – though it remains Islamist – after parting ways with al-Qaeda in 2016.[2] Historically, HTS evolved from Jabhat al-Nusra, which emerged in 2012 as an independent group fighting the Syrian regime, despite being formed by an ISI commander in coordination with the Iraqi organization who nonetheless took his decisions independently.[3] In 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra rejected ISIS, pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda instead. The allegiance lasted until 2016, when the group further severed ties with al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda loyalist hence left the organization, and later created their own group, Hurras al-Din, in 2018. Before the formation of HTS in 2017, when former Jabhat al-Nusra allied with other Syrian armed opposition groups in a new entity, the group was Jihadi, which is a label describing a range of armed groups that collectively form a social movement composed of '(a) mostly informal networks of interaction, based on (b) shared beliefs and solidarity, mobilized around (c) contentious themes through (d) the frequent use of various forms of protest' [in this case, repertoires of armed violence] (Della Porta & Mattoni, 2016). Jihadis share an ideology, several modus operandi (such as suicide bombing and violence against religious minorities), potentially an oath of allegiance to al-Qaeda or IS, and are interconnected in networks of militants that previously fought in conflicts as Afghanistan in the late 1980s, Bosnia in the 1990s, Chechnya in the early 2000s, and Iraq in the 2000s. Despite some internal differences of opinion and occasional conflicts among them (Hamming, 2022; Maghadam & Fishman, 2010), they maintain similar worldviews, sharing a general endorsement of violence – at least in theory – against Muslim regimes that fail to implement their understanding of Islamic law.[4] After rejecting al-Qaeda, HTS remains Islamist, as it continues to use Islam as the

primary frame of reference for its broader political and social agenda.[5] The group officially strives to establish its own version of what an Islamic order should look like, even aligning itself with movements like the Taliban and Hamas – despite real differences in both trajectories and practical governance due to very different contexts.[6]

HTS's governance is uniquely positioned between academic research on rebel governance and the political participation of Islamist movements in the Muslim world, though it is also distinct from both. Research on rebel governance analyses the context in which non-state armed groups rule civilian populations, including their rationales and the nature, features, and functions of their governing structures.[7] The ideological nature of Jihadi governance in particular distinguishes it from other forms of rebel governance associated with national liberation or leftist movements, particularly in terms of the latter's pursuit of international legitimacy and external support from states.[8] Research on Islamist political parties conversely explores how groups usually associated with the Muslim Brotherhood compete in domestic elections in Muslim countries and its impact on the evolution of their ideas and practices, as framed in the inclusion-moderation thesis.[9] HTS in Syria is unique since it combines aspects from both fields of study, as its governance over northwest Syria bears resemblance to the ruling methods employed by Islamist political parties – despite HTS not subscribing to democracy as a governing principle – as much as from other non-ideological rebel groups ruling civilians elsewhere.

This research explores the case study of HTS and the Syrian Salvation Government (the civilian government that rules the Idlib province, which HTS supports) to explain how this governance project unfolded, the distinctive features of the group's departure from its Jihadi legacy, and the reasons behind its relatively more inclusive approach towards other Muslims and non-Muslim communities.[10] This article argues that HTS's political practices in Idlib are undergoing a significant shift away from Jihadism, towards a more mainstream and less ideological approach to governance. While the overarching objective of establishing Islamic law in the long run persists, it is now imbued with a different understanding of what it means due to pragmatic considerations. This strategic shift results from the cumulative effect of numerous tactical and opportunistic decisions made out of necessity, including the need to curb internal dissidence, reach out to external actors, and partially delegate governance locally. Although HTS's pragmatism is ultimately the outcome of a power-centric strategy, it is steering a real ideological evolution and a genuine transformation through new practices. The process renders any reversion to the past – or re-radicalization – unfeasible, considering that more radical voices have been excluded and HTS's own survival depends on pursuing this trajectory. This research is based on extensive fieldwork conducted in northwest Syria between 2019 and 2024 in which

the authors interviewed the main HTS leaders, its supported government, as well as other actors including other armed groups and civil society organizations. We conducted multiple interviews with our interlocutors – whether from HTS, other groups, or civil society – due to the rapid pace at which events unfolded.

This article was finalized before the armed opposition, led by HTS, took over Damascus in December 2024. While it provides significant insight into the group's transformation through governance, seizing control of an entire country presents a fundamentally different case – one shaped in part by its past evolution but also by new and distinct challenges.

HTS as Jihadi or Islamist rebel governance?

HTS's governance is positioned between rebel (and Jihadi) governance and Islamist political parties' practices. HTS is a post-Jihadi ruler that shares important similarities with other non-state armed groups that have seized territories, some of which pursue ideological agendas too.[11] While it has a Jihadi legacy, originating as a splinter group of ISIS in 2013 and subsequently becoming the most successful al-Qaeda affiliate worldwide between 2013 and 2016, its governing approach is more aligned with mainstream Islamist parties resembling those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, even though HTS is also in a unique position as it directly rules a specific territory rather than functioning within a conventional domestic institutional framework.

HTS's governance bears more resemblance to the political participation of Islamist movements associated with the Muslim Brotherhood than other Jihadis per se, despite HTS's Jihadi genealogy. This similarity stems from HTS's shift away from Jihadis' attempts to disrupt the political and social order, seeking instead to establish an authority that closely mirrors conventional governance structures but with a role for Islam. Previous studies on this theme primarily focused on the involvement of Islamist political parties within their respective domestic political systems and its impact. The inclusion-moderation thesis, in particular, raised questions about whether participation in domestic political systems leads to changes in these groups' ideological beliefs and behaviour.[12] This body of research suggests that behavioural and ideological transformations occur at the intersection of shifting political opportunities, Islamists' organizational dynamics, and their framing of their new positions. Prior to 2011, Islamists faced limited political opportunities to actually rule. The political openings after 2011 was therefore an opportunity to test the inclusion-moderation thesis, with very different outcomes depending on each group's context and historical background. For example, Tunisia's Ennahda pursued alliances and demonstrated more flexibility than Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, who was less flexible in part due to

the competition with Salafis (Lacroix, 2024; Schwedler, 2013; Yaghi, 2021). These differences can be attributed not only to varying process of regime consolidation (Nugent, 2020), but also to these groups' organizational dynamics and the distribution of power within them (Gumuscu, 2023). There are relatively fewer cases that examine the political participation of armed groups or former Jihadi organizations, such as in Egypt (Drevon, 2015). These cases generally suggest that most Islamist groups adapt their behaviours in favourable environments, although some of their ideological commitments related to Islamic law may persist. These studies yield significant insights into Islamist behavioural and ideological change, emphasizing that change is largely informed by the institutional context in which these groups operate. However, a group like HTS also differs from these cases because of its distinct institutional contexts; the group does not operate within an existing regime that regulate political participation but rather seek to replace the Syrian regime with its own.

Since HTS operates outside of a domestic institutional framework and exercises direct governance over the population, it is closer to so-called rebel rulers, whose governance is the 'organization of civilians within rebel held territory for a public purpose [including the] encouragement of civilian participation, provision of civilian administration, or organization of civilians for significant material gain' (Kasfir, 2015). Previous studies primarily focused on non-Islamist groups, exploring a combination of pre-war and in-war factors that explains the governing choices of armed groups in conflicts. Pre-war factors include the pre-existing relationships between the state and society before the conflict, armed groups' long-term objectives, ideological legacies, and the ethnic composition and strategic objectives of the insurgents. These factors interact with in-war dynamics, such as the ability of these groups to maintain organizational discipline and navigate relationships with domestic and international actors. Other in-war factors include the patterns of interaction between armed groups during the conflict, the pursuit of domestic and international legitimacy, and the influence of community cohesion on their resistance to armed groups. The combined effect of pre-war and in-war factors shapes rebels' governance strategies and determines the type of social order they are able to establish during armed conflicts (Arjona, 2016; Jo, 2015; Kaplan, 2017; Krause, 2018; Stanton, 2016).

Yet, despite HTS's past association with IS and a-Qaeda, Jihadis who control territories are very different from HTS. Historically, Jihadis are defined by their opposition to Muslim rulers who fail to implement their vision of Islamic law and by their aspiration to establish an Islamic state in the long run, whether through popular revolution or a military coup (e.g., Drevon, 2022). Prior to 2011, most Jihadis viewed the creation of an Islamic state as a long-term objective rather than an immediate possibility. But the weakening of numerous Muslim regimes after 2011 created opportunities in the Middle

East, North Africa, and Africa, enabling militants to seize territories and set up their own proto-states in places as diverse as the Sahel, Somalia, and Yemen. Jihadi governance is distinct due to the ideological commitments that shape their tactical and strategic choices. While Jihadi rulers may share common characteristics with non-ideological insurgents or those embracing different ideological views, Jihadi insurgents also exhibit some peculiarities. Although there are variations in their methods of governance, such as the appointment of local judges in the Sahel or the implementation of some bureaucracy in northeast Nigeria and Somalia, these groups share, as described by Lia, "ideological, internationalist, territorially expansive, and irredentist" characteristics. Lia also adds that Jihadi rule tends to be more bureaucratic, as their ideological nature dismisses a reliance on blood ties and kinship (Lia, 2017). Furthermore, ideology can influence policies that may not appear immediately rational, such as the Islamic State's imposition of taxes in resource-rich areas where they might not be necessary, to emphasize their claims to statehood (Revkin, 2020).

HTS's governance is therefore at the crossroad of Islamist and rebel governance. It is peculiar because of its non-ideological features, as the group increasingly tries to dissociate itself from its Jihadi legacy. In Stewart's typology of rebel governance (Stewart, 2021), HTS's governance is not intensive since it fulfils non-transformative – and therefore less politically costly – functions but it is extensive since it serves all the population of northwest Syria.[13] HTS is therefore closer to (1) mainstream Islamists looking for a role for Islam in governance but who also renounce some of their ideological agenda and respond to external institutional incentives, and (2) rebel governors who seek international legitimacy, for instance, through an engagement with international humanitarian law (Jo, 2015). The question that still lingers is the precise reasoning behind and the mechanisms driving these changes. Existing research on HTS has hitherto covered issues such as its interactions with civilians and its measures to combat IS networks (Bamber & Svensson, 2022; Zelin, 2023). There is only limited research delving into the intricacies of HTS's governance system (Drevon & Haenni, 2020, p. 42, 2021; Grant-Brook, 2023; Keser & Fakhoury, 2022).

The imposition of governance under constraints

There are real variations in the reasons and contexts behind Jihadis' governance projects. For example, al-Qaeda views governance as a long-term objective, and Osama bin Laden himself did not believe that most Jihadis, whether in Mali, Yemen, or Somalia, were sufficiently strong to establish their own states.[14] Prior to his death in 2011, he even advised against such attempts. The establishment of Jihadi governance in these regions was rather the result of immediate opportunities rather than a meticulously planned political

strategy. Islamic State (IS) stands out because it defines itself as a state and seeks to establish its presence in any region where its "provinces" are able to seize and control territories, especially in Africa (Warner et al., 2022). IS has developed relatively clear guidelines on how to govern local populations in these areas, reflecting its state-building ambitions (Zelin, 2016).

The governance implemented by HTS in Syria was not a predetermined plan but rather a response to its specific context. HTS's predecessor, Jabhat al-Nusra, established a system of courts in 2015, which were often shared with other insurgents in places like Aleppo (Berti, 2023; Schwab, 2018). Jabhat al-Nusra did not try to seize vast territories and establish an independent state. Instead, various opposition-held areas collaborated and shared power based on local dynamics and the balance of power between different groups. HTS's governance project only began to take shape in 2017 with the establishment of the first so-called Salvation Government, which the group promoted to rule northwest Syria. This development was catalysed by the loss of many opposition-held areas in the periphery of Damascus, the southern regions of Syria, northern Homs and, ultimately, the city of Aleppo. As these losses mounted, the insurgency gradually faced the necessity of unification. When HTS failed to bring all armed groups under its umbrella, largely because other groups did not want to join a proscribed group that they did not trust, it began promoting its own governance project that it imposed on other groups as a fait accompli.[15]

HTS established its governance gradually, as the group did not initially control the entire province of Idlib. The insurgency in Syria polarized between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham, its main rival (Drevon, 2020, 2021, 2024b). In 2017, HTS only controlled certain areas that were previously under Jabhat al-Nusra's influence while facing opposition in many other regions. From 2017 to 2019, HTS and Ahrar al-Sham and their respective allies engaged in conflict before HTS emerged victorious (Abazeid, 2018). After HTS gained control over the province, it imposed its own governance structures in the areas it took over. This involved seizing control of civilian infrastructure previously held by other groups, including their prison facilities and local courts of justice. HTS nonetheless allowed these groups to remain as military forces, although they were weaker compared to HTS.[16]

HTS encouraged the Salvation Government to form itself step by step, starting with the establishment of a limited number of ministries (Drevon & Haenni, 2021). The ministries began to formulate internal regulations to assert their authority over armed groups and local councils, effectively assuming governance functions previously held by other armed factions. In the realm of justice, this process involved either forcefully taking control of factional courts or negotiating their transfer.[17] Although HTS played a prominent role in establishing the Salvation Government, it does not seek to exercise meticulous daily control or engage in micro-management. Recognizing its

limitations in terms of governance and a lack of direct commitment to ruling the population, HTS has displayed a willingness to delegate authority to educated urban elites. This delegation is primarily driven by practical considerations arising from limited resources, rather than ideological views. It has also enabled the group to incorporate technocratic elites alongside elements of the previous revolutionary elite. In addition to centralizing governance and delegating authority to a 'technocratic' elite, HTS has outsourced certain public services, especially in health and education, to foreign organizations and NGOs. While the Salvation Government receives support from certain segments of the local elite, such as urban professionals, entrepreneurs, and tribal figures, it faces significant opposition from some civil activists and journalists. The latter criticize the Salvation Government for aligning with HTS and suppressing independent civil institutions.[18]

Managing the Jihadi legacy

HTS's governance emerged out of necessity rather than being driven primarily by an ideological project. It serves multiple purposes beyond meeting immediate needs for the stabilization of northwest Syria. One of the key outcomes of governance was to facilitate the transformation of the group itself. HTS enacted internal changes and restructured itself through the institution of governance, which provided a framework for the group to consolidate power, isolate dissenting voices, and remove individuals who opposed the transformation process. HTS's governance hence helped the group create a system that allowed for internal adjustments and adaptations to solidify its position, reinforce internal control, and establish a more cohesive and centralized institutional structure.

HTS's main challenge is that it could not simply change trajectory out of necessity without risking internal resistance. Ideas matter for armed groups, as they cannot simply disregard their ideological legacy without risking internal dissent and criticisms that could undermine their governance project.[19] HTS recognized the need to carefully navigate its ideological and religious legacy to ensure the success and stability of its governance efforts. The group's management of its ideological legacy occurred gradually, taking into account various actors including other armed groups, and gradually institutionalizing these changes to mitigate its adverse effects, minimize internal disruptions, and maintain enough support and internal cohesion.

The first step in HTS's transformation was to severe its transnationalism, which is a defining feature of Jihadi Salafism. While HTS had not engaged in foreign attacks prior to 2017 when it still was Jabhat al-Nusra, it had an allegiance to two transnational groups, IS and then al-Qaeda, making it a target of international scrutiny. Renouncing global jihad was crucial in gaining broader acceptance and reducing external pressure as many other armed

groups were hesitant to unite with HTS due to this transnational connection to al-Qaeda and IS.[20] First, a substantial number of foreign fighters from Jabhat al-Nusra preferred to join IS when Jabhat al-Nusra initially broke ties with the Iraqi group in 2013.[21] Then, HTS's separation from al-Qaeda in Summer 2016 and subsequent transformation into HTS in January 2017 met with resistance and opposition from some prominent commanders (Hassan, 2018; C. Lister, 2018).[22] Those who opposed the changes formed Hurras al-Din in 2018, a group that aligned with al-Qaeda, allowing HTS to remove additional veterans of global jihad from its ranks. The threat to HTS further diminished as many of the same veterans were killed in US drone strikes.[23] Interviews conducted with individual members of Hurras al-Din revealed genuine fears of being targeted by the U.S. lead coalition, while their affiliation with al-Qaeda provided limited benefits.[24]

The second step beside rejecting transnationalism was the formation of HTS itself, which involved integrating independent religious preachers into the group to impose the re-localization promoted by the group. Prior to this, many independent religious scholars close to the Jihadis exerted influence and leverage within the armed opposition. Their integration into HTS in 2017 was initially useful since they provided religious justification for the group's actions, serving as a source of motivation and legitimacy for internal fights. They were often at the forefront of the battles against other insurgents, especially Ahrar al-Sham. For instance, several Egyptian figures such as Abu Shu'ib al-Masri and Abu Fath al-Farghali provided the religious rationale of the fight, even justifying the killing of Ahrar al-Sham members.[25] HTS then had to deal with these individuals, who were willing to accept the end of transnationalism but still held more radical views. While HTS did not directly try to impose new ideological beliefs upon them, it strived to bring them into the fold to exert control over their activities and prevent them from expressing divergent positions publicly. By unifying the independent preachers and imposing more rules and regulations, HTS aimed to restrict their autonomy and ensure their compliance with the group's objectives.[26] This approach served as a means of controlling them without necessarily addressing the content of their beliefs.[27] Some of the Egyptians who did not adhere to the new rules were expelled from the group and faced judgement for their non-compliance.[28] Through institutionalization, HTS sought to streamline its religious scholars and align them with the group's strategic choices through the imposition of new norms and procedures. This procedural approach sought to gradually bring hardliners in line with the group's agenda and minimize their disruptive influence, while asserting HTS's own authority.

Then, HTS's own framework of understanding started to change. One of the key issues with Jihadi Salafism is the presence of independent figures of authority who act based on their own thoughts and ideas without organizational constraints. Figures like Abu Qatada and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi,

along with other important ones on the international stage, have historically held significant influence on Jihadis. Jihadis are historically closer to the horizontal approach to Salafism promoted by Nasir al-Din al-Albani – despite real political divergences – who do not tend to rely on traditional schools of jurisprudence but rather interpret the sources (Quran and Hadith) themselves. To marginalize their impact, HTS implemented measures such as forbidding the works of these intellectuals, especially Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi's, emphasizing that only its own Sharia council could express a consensual public ruling.[29] While the group continues to uphold the *Athari/ Salafi* religious creed (*'aqida*), it relies more thoroughly on jurisprudence, including the jurisprudence of priorities and balance (*fiqh al-awliyyat wa al-muwazana*). It has also renounced any reference and implementation of Salafi Jihadi's most distinctive concepts, such as *al-wala al-bara* (loyalty and dissociation) and *'adam isti'ana bil-kuffar* (non-assistance from non-believers), which both forbid any alliance with non Jihadis and contradict HTS's reliance on Turkey for the defence of the province (Drevon, 2024a). Additionally, HTS reintroduced a reference to the traditional schools of jurisprudence (*maddhab*) to re-emphasize local structures of religious authority. While al-Qaeda, for instance, is not necessarily opposed to the schools of jurisprudence per se,[30] HTS's objectives is to impose an endogenous religious frame of reference as it reasserts the importance of local cultural norms to further distance itself from the Jihadis by marginalizing the role of foreign ideologues close to them. The school of jurisprudence, especially the Shafiʿi school, were reintroduced in the Sharia Faculty of the University of Idlib and other institutions to exert greater control over religious production, including fatwas, and to determine who was entitled to provide religious guidance.[31] It also reemphasises HTS's reculturation away from Salafi transnationalism. Through these measures, HTS aimed to assert control over individual preachers and ensure that religious interpretations aligned with their objectives.

Institutionalization also extends to the military. Initially, Jabhat al-Nusra focused on the recruitment of individuals who were committed to its ideological project.[32] However, as the group evolved, it became a larger movement, attracting a broader range of people, including those who had been expelled from other Syrian regions and had arrived in Idlib looking for an alternative. HTS sought to accommodate these new recruits by providing them with better conditions and addressing the diverse backgrounds and education levels they brought with them. HTS implemented simplified religious training that moved away from divisive and complex ideological concepts and instead focused on providing a more accessible and practical religious education.[33] Gradually, HTS has sought to promote greater professionalization within its ranks. This involved unifying the military forces and introducing new internal training programmes. Collaboration with the military council and forming alliances with other armed groups in the Fath al-

Mubin operation room, including Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham, contributed to the professionalization efforts. HTS also established a military academy and implemented measures to transform its militants into professional soldiers.[34] This shift was driven by the recognition that the group needed professional individuals who could exercise control and adhere to discipline. Loosely structured – and often ideologically motivated – foreign fighters became more a burden than a strength in these new circumstances. HTS imposed on foreign-led groups that they either join its own military forces, or the new battalions created for them within HTS's military structures, or – more rarely – remain independent but fully abide to the decisions of the Fath al-Mubin operation room (International Crisis Group, 2023).

The implementation of governance provided an opportunity to further centralize HTS and marginalize its previous military commanders. Previously, as Jabhat al-Nusra, the group operated in a relatively decentralized manner which allowed a degree of local autonomy to its brigades. In the system of blocs (*qawati'*), every regional unit was led by a military command (*amir*) and a religious scholar (*shar'i*), who were given general guidelines and considerable freedom to administer justice. Local rulings relied heavily on the discretion of local judges (*shari'in*), many of whom were foreigners from the Gulf. The transformation of governance marked a significant change. In 2018, HTS dismantled the decentralized structures that had granted local sections (*qawati'*) substantial autonomy in managing local affairs.[35] While HTS emphasised the need for centralisation and institutionalisation, the objective went beyond that and had significant political implications. It aimed to dismantle the authority vested in amirs and religious scholars at the local level and replace them with young technocrats who had been socialised within the context of the Syrian revolution, being more interested in the Syrian revolution than Jabhat al-Nusra's previous ideological views.

HTS empowered this new class of individuals to staff the administration of the regions of the liberated areas (*idarat al-manatiq al-muharrara*), which became a crucial institution in empowering the Salvation Government locally especially after HTS's decision to centralize governance. Comprised of 350 members organized into local sections across the seven regions of Idlib, the administration of the regions is the interface between the Salvation Government and HTS.[36] Its establishment in 2018 was a response to the shortcomings and dysfunction of the Salvation Government, whose decisions were contested by HTS military commanders and religious clerics who held responsibility within the previous bloc structures. The administration of the regions derives its authority from its strong informal connections with the HTS leadership and Jolani himself, allowing it to compensate for the weaknesses of the Salvation Government. It plays a crucial role in HTS's centralization efforts led by Jolani's inner circle and contributes to the dismantling of the old local structures associated with Jabhat al-Nusra. In this sense, the

administration of the regions serves as an alternative to these previous structures and becomes an instrumental component of HTS's strategic dissociation from its Jihadi legacy.

Enforcing Shariʿa compliance in governance?

One critical aspect for the group revolves around the application of Islamic law, which officially remains HTS's objective. Though HTS has renounced global jihad, it still insists that it established an Islamic order in northwest Syria. The group is nonetheless confronted with the practical realities of governance in the region and the challenges associated with implementing its vision in practice, which it does through a technocratic government that set it apart from other insurgent leaders, particularly those driven by ideological agendas such as Jihadis. HTS's understanding of Islamic law in practice provides insights into the group's approach to governance and a better understanding of how the group navigates the complexities of governing within a religious framework while simultaneously addressing the practical demands of providing effective governance for the areas under its control.

One of the primary challenges faced by HTS pertains to the imposition of unified legal framework in northwest Syria that could overcome the diverse interpretations of Islamic law by individual judges inherent with this corpus.[37] This issue stems from the nature of Islamic jurisprudence, which provides an important degree of flexibility to judges that can lead to inconsistencies and tensions when trying to establish a unified and predictable legal framework within a modern administration. The need to unify and standardize the judicial system was therefore driven more by political necessity than independent religious debates per se, since HTS primarily sought to establish a stable and predictable governance structure in the region. HTS hence organized a conference and a round of discussion on the codification (*taqnin*) of Islamic law to address the issue of legal interpretation. It insisted that the call for the implementation of Islamic law (*tahkim al-shar'ia*) lacks clarity, posing the risk of enabling broad and varied interpretations by individual judges. HTS aimed to limit the margin of interpretation and reduce the discretion of judges while also asserting the authority of the institutional order it seeks to establish. This process of codification and the containment of radicalism through institution-building within the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence are mutually reinforcing, as the staunchest critics of this process either departed from the group or distanced themselves from it. It does not necessarily imply individual deradicalization, as former hardliners are still allowed to remain within the movement as long as they adhere to the new set of norms. They may not have become moderates in their beliefs, but they lack the opportunity and authority to impose radical measures under the new governance structures.

Two approaches exist in the codification of Islamic law (Elgawhary, 2019). The first is a top-down approach, whereby Muslim authorities rely on the sources of Islamic law and opinions from scholars to establish a legal framework. This method derives legal rulings directly from the primary sources of Islamic jurisprudence. It involves a thorough analysis of religious texts and classical sources to form a comprehensive understanding of Islamic law. This approach seeks to establish Islamic law in a canonical text of enacted law, thereby reducing the scriptural ambiguity of Sharia and, by extension, the discretion of judges. It makes Islamic law a modern autonomous legal code – insofar as it is written – even if it initially refers to religion as inspiration. On the other hand, the compatibility-based approach allows for the introduction of new laws and regulations that are not directly derived from Islamic jurisprudence, while simply ensuring their compatibility (or the absence of contradiction) with Islamic law. This approach is often favoured by movements influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), as seen in their position on establishing a ruling board, as well as in debates surrounding personal status issues in 2012, when the group headed Egypt's government and presented a new constitution later rescinded by new Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sissi. This approach acknowledges the need to address contemporary challenges and adapt legal frameworks while ensuring they align with Islamic law.

HTS uses the compatibility approach to Islamic law in its jurisprudence. In Idlib, the Council of the Fatwa (*majlis al-ifta*) of the Salvation Government serves as the Sharia board responsible for overseeing the process of religious standardization.[38] Instead of codifying a comprehensive legal corpus based on Islamic law, the current approach focuses on transforming the circulars of the Ministry of Justice into law while ensuring their compliance with Sharia. This approach follows the logic of Sharia compliance, or Sharia politics (*siyasa al-shar'iyya*). The Council of the Fatwa plays a crucial role in this oversight process and functions as a Sharia board, similar to the Assembly of Experts in Iran. Composed of individuals who advocate for Islamic conformity, its ensures that legislative processes and decisions align with their understanding of Islamic principles. Fatwas are issued upon requests from various government bodies, either to guide political decision-making or as a preliminary step before submitting laws to the Shura Council (equivalent to a parliament, though its members are not elected by the population). While fatwas invoke transcendence in principle, in practice, the inner circle of Jolani (i.e., the political leadership), ensures conformity with Islamic teachings, rather than an autonomous clerical body driven by its own corporatist interests. As a result, these fatwas tend to reflect more of a political council rather than purely theological opinions.

The mobilization of religious reference of the Council of the Fatwa is based on very general principles.[39] For instance, in response to an inquiry from the

Council of Ministers' presidency, seeking advice on the principle of capping prices of essential goods, the Council delivered a fatwa that does not oppose the idea, considering it serves the common interest of Muslims and stabilizes markets by preventing price manipulations and fund diversions. The Council believes that it is crucial to uphold principles of justice in determining prices to benefit both parties – the seller and the buyer. While the Council affirms that there are principled reservations against allowing authorities to hinder the freedom of commerce, the freedom of interpretation is left to competent authorities, with the expectation that they make decisions based on their impact on the common interest. In other words, the decision is left to the policymakers without compelling them to adhere to a religious standard. Similarly, the fatwa requested by the Council of Ministers' presidency of the State Security Group regarding the traffic law immediately states that the draft submitted to the Council is not contrary to Sharia. The fatwa proceeds to provide a series of recommendations, many of which are political in nature. These recommendations cover various points, including the wording of different parts of the law and the suggestion to use the US dollar or its equivalent in Turkish lira for fines, to avoid constant adjustments due to the collapse of the Syrian pound. The fatwa also urges the avoidance of over-burdened courts as much as possible, aiming to limit cases of pretrial detention. To achieve this, they call for the establishment of a specific section of the law for offences requiring arrests and subsequent court appearances. The objective, once again, is to minimize resorting to courts by clearly defining their scope of operation. The name Council of the Fatwa is therefore misleading. Idlib did not have a clerical government. Instead, a small group of decision-makers closely aligned with Jolani oversaw the political and legislative process and ensured compliance with Islamic teachings, rather than an autonomous clerical body operating according to its own institutional logic.

HTS finally exerts control over religious discourse. HTS aims to prevent political opposition and radical discourses more than religious diversity per se. Upon seizing control of Idlib, the group initially sought to diminish the influence of imams who opposed its agenda. These actions were driven more by political considerations rather than religious ones, as they aimed to curb political adversaries while displaying greater tolerance towards individuals with differing religious beliefs who posed no political challenge.[40] Without imposing specific sermon content, bureaucrats in the Salvation Government now propose a weekly set of sermons (*khutba*) that mosques can use, which centralizes the dominant discourse and limits dissident voices. The Salvation Government also demands that mosque preachers be licenced with the ministry of endowments and religious affairs, which serves as a mechanism to regulate and monitor religious activities, ensuring conformity with the group's objectives and preventing the spread of potentially divergent or politically contentious ideas. The same approach combining an ongoing

effort of bureaucratic rationalization and limitation of religious offers exists in religious educational institutions. The establishment of the Salvation Government in 2017 imposed new regulations issued by the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs that subjected religious educational institutions to a regulatory regime that affects both the staff of the institutions – who require a university degree – and the content of education, which standardize educational textbooks and impose the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence in all institutions.[41] As a result, many institutes had to close, and to this day, only 12 of them remain in total.[42] In addition to shutting down institutions due to their lack of professionalism, the group also took action against an institute that shared ideological similarities with the Hazimis, a faction previously in IS known for excommunicating Muslims who do not adhere to their beliefs, even going as far as to excommunicate the IS leadership, let alone HTS.[43] These measures helped HTS to suppress political dissent within religious institutions and promote religious perspectives – even if they are not Salafi per se – that are not antagonistic to the group.

There are occasional efforts to introduce stricter religious norms, which have met resistance from society. Initially, the Salvation Government attempted to curtail women's rights by imposing a male guardian requirement for leaving the house, which it had to abandon in the face of societal pushback.[44] Another example was the establishment of the Sawa'id al-Khayr (Arms of Good) and then the Markaz al-Falah (the Salvation Centre), which both sought to impose stricter religious norms in public places including discourage non-Islamic behaviours such as gender mixing in public spaces and monitoring women's attire. Once again, these efforts were met with resistance, and ultimately, HTS shut down both of them (Syria, 2021). Women's associations report facing early challenges due to HTS's concerns about groups advocating for women's rights. While they continue to experience pressure, the focus has shifted away from their advocacy for women's rights and is now more centred on their perceived involvement in independent political activities rather than solely being identified as women's associations.[45] It is important to note that these developments do not solely lead to the closure of these initiatives in a one-directional manner. For instance, the Salvation Government imposed new dress code requirements in Summer 2023 on women in schools, mandating the wearing of abayas.[46] However, as a whole, these measures seem to align more closely with a conservative movement, akin to Muslim Brotherhood parties, rather than resembling the goals and tactics of a Jihadi group.

In December 2023, the Shura Council – which is an institution akin to a legislative body in the province – ratified a public morality law in Idlib, Syria, regulating a wide range of behaviour in public spaces, such as markets, malls, restaurants, and cafés (Shura Council, 2024). The law prohibits acts like gender mixing, witchcraft, homosexuality, and public insults to Islamic

figures, enforced by a morality police under the judiciary's authority. This move arose from pressure by local conservative circles, including notable families and clerics, who viewed the growing openness and consumerism in post-war Idlib as threatening traditional values.[47] Since the 2020 Russian-Turkish truce, public life in Idlib had seen significant liberalization, with public spaces, malls, and cafés flourishing. Many in conservative sectors of society – along with some other armed groups and religious scholars close to them beyond HTS – felt this openness had gone too far, leading them to push for regulation through the Shura Council, despite the absence of any direct penalties for the violations specified in the law.[48]

Paradoxically, HTS – nor its leader al-Jolani – did not directly initiate the law, which it ultimately decided to freeze. While HTS had previously distanced itself from strict moral enforcement, favouring a more open public space after the 2020 truce, pressure from conservative elements within society, particularly influential families and clerics, left the group in a delicate position. The leadership, especially Abu Mohamed al-Jolani, was initially reluctant to engage with the law, viewing it as a distraction from the group's broader political and military goals.[49] Considering that HTS's strategy has long been to balance the demands of conservative factions without alienating the more moderate elements of society or jeopardizing its international standing, the leadership saw this law as potentially harmful to their efforts to change strategy in north-west Syria, also fearing that it would drive away international donors and raise concerns of creeping radicalism. As a result, HTS chose to freeze the law rather than fully endorse or reject it. The freeze reflects HTS's transactional approach, preventing the law's enforcement to avoid upsetting international actors involved in humanitarian efforts in the region, many of whom viewed the law as a regressive step. However, rather than formally opposing the law, HTS could only stall its execution, avoiding a full confrontation with conservative forces while attempting to protect its broader strategic interests.

Dealing with religious minorities

The evolution of HTS's positions on religious minorities is also quite telling as to its rejection of Salafi Jihadism. Historically, Jihadis have enforced restrictive measures against religious minorities, with non-Christians, such as the Druze, facing particular challenges due to their ambiguous status in Islamic law. As they are not recognized as 'people of the book', their position remains unclear and subject to contestation. In Idlib, a small population of Christians and Druze coexist alongside a significant majority of Muslims, posing a challenge that HTS, as a former Jihadi group, had to address.

During the first phase of the conflict in Syria, both Christians and Druze adopted a political stance of non-alignment, refraining from

joining any particular camp while extending their hospitality to civilian displaced persons passing through their villages.[50] However, as armed groups became increasingly dominated by Jihadis, the Druze community found itself compelled to adapt. Jebel al-Samaq became particularly attractive for internally displaced persons from other regions due to the large number of Druze residents leaving the area.[51] In response, many Druze individuals began defensively gravitating towards Islam, initially without a well-defined strategy. Individually, they started incorporating more and more Sunni Muslim rituals into their practices, much like those who had resided in Aleppo and had assimilated into a conservative Sunni urban environment. Over time, as pressure for Druze conversion intensified, these adjustments became more significant. By 2013, the shift extended beyond personal religious practices and transformed into a collective and public conversion movement among the Druze community.

During the capture of Idlib by Jaysh al-Fath in 2015, there was a significant increase in religious pressure, which had detrimental effects on the Druze community.[52] The coercive measures included house confiscations, threats, humiliations, and the desecration of mausoleums and graves. These actions accelerated the exodus and led to a demographic transformation of the Druze mountain area. One particularly tragic incident that symbolized the height of these escalating tensions was the massacre on 10 June 2015 in Qalb Luza. This violent event unfolded as clashes erupted between the Shibli Druze family and militants affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra, which resulted in the death of 23 Druze individuals. The lenient sentence imposed on the local commander, Abderahman al-Tunisi, who was responsible for the massacre, further exacerbated the already strained relations between the communities involved.[53]

The institutionalization of power under the 'administration of the regions' established by HTS played a crucial role in pacifying the situation.[54] Efforts were made to address the concerns of these religious communities, including visits by HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani to foster reconciliation and alleviate tensions. There has been a notable shift in religious discourse from a primarily religious perspective to a more politically oriented approach, with the HTS leadership insisting that the local religious communities did not side against the revolution, and should therefore be respected.[55] This change starts to materialize. Although Christians continue to encounter restrictions related to symbols such as church bells and crosses, HTS and the Salvation Government have allowed the resumption of their religious ceremonies and resolved most issues related to property, with most houses being returned to their rightful owners though some land disputes remain unsolved.[56] Another pressing issue in the region was the presence of foreign fighters, particularly from Central Asian countries, who tend to hold more radical ideas and occasionally pressure religious minorities, which HTS restrained over the years.[57]

On the other hand, the situation has been more complex for the Druze community. While the group maintains its religious position on the Druze as a religious community, HTS now recognizes the need to interact with them politically and not simply in terms of theology.[58] One noteworthy example is Abu Abdullah al-Shami, HTS's top religious figure, who has played a significant role in advocating for a more nuanced approach towards the Druze community. He recognizes the importance of respecting the rights of the Druze, emphasizing the need for a clear distinction between their religious beliefs and their political standing during the conflict, arguing that the Druze did not stand against the opposition, welcomed refugees from other regions, and that their rights should therefore should be preserved.[59] This shift also impacts the discourse and nature of HTS. The political discourse is moving away from the Salafi matrix that partially determined – or justified – the policy towards these groups, in order to align with a new political discourse of minority rights, where the emphasis is on the relationship with the state rather than transcendence, occasionally emphasizing equality under the law.[60] HTS's behaviour is therefore closer to mainstream Islamists' engagement with minorities in places like Sudan and Turkey, which is driven more by alliance-building to secure or consolidate power than by purely religious motives (Daoud, 2023).

Conclusion

HTS occupies a unique position within the landscape of rebel governance, at the crossroad of both rebel governance and Islamist political participation. Unlike other Jihadis rulers, HTS focuses on stabilizing its control over a certain territory rather than pursuing a Jihadi agenda that it would try to impose on the population. The group's approach has shifted towards a more political rationale, prioritizing governance and administration over ideology. But HTS still has had to grapple with its Jihadi legacy. HTS had to reconcile its political objectives with the need to avoid internal dissidence. It notably had to manage foreign fighters and religious preachers who espoused more radical views through the institutionalization of religious authority. This step opened the door for further governance reforms, including the neutralization of divisive Salafi concepts such as *al-wala wal-bara* and the interdiction of 'assistance from non-Muslims', and a focus on a ruling approach that is more bureaucratic than ideological. This means that HTS is engaged in the processes of institution-building and state formation, with some similarities to other Islamist groups in their approach to Islamic law though HTS is not operating within an existing political system but aims to construct one from the ground up, which limits the relevance of traditional Islamist political parties.

The driving forces behind this transformation unveils a theory of practice rather than a predetermined course. HTS finds itself in a state of continual adaptation due to evolving circumstances, opposition, and resistance. This ongoing adjustment process results in the sidelining of hesitant voices and opposition, thus establishing a self-reinforcing cycle of change. The group is forced to adopt a trajectory that might not have been part of the initial plan. This trajectory nonetheless remains steadfast, with minimal room for reversion, as the group systematically undergoes transformation by gradually marginalizing certain factions while bolstering those who support Jolani's choices. This pattern leads to an effectual outcome. Though some of HTS's ideological components, primarily rooted in Salafi religious beliefs and the role of Islamic law in governance, remains, their practical ramifications are limited and largely shaped by political considerations.

HTS is therefore no longer Jihadi, though it remains Islamist. The group has distanced itself from transnational groups like IS and al-Qaeda, employing force to contain their members while looking for international legitimacy. Its mode of governance does not resemble typical Jihadi rulers – despite their internal diversity – but instead mirrors the strategies employed by non-ideological rebels, particularly those aiming for international legitimacy. The Salvation Government occasionally promotes conservative religious conduct, but this approach aligns more with the actions of political parties associated with the Muslim Brotherhood than with Jihadi practices. In essence, HTS still uphold Salafi creedal beliefs (*'aqida*) in a narrow sense, as its leadership still adheres to this approach to Islam's core belief system. But, in practice, HTS's Salafism has little political implications regarding how it governs northwestern Syria.

Notes

1. Other Jihadis, like JNIM in Northern Mali and AQAP (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) have occasionally shown more pragmatism locally, but never renounced implementing their ideological tenets like HTS in north west Syria.
2. For a richer argument of how HTS left jihadism, see Drevon and Haenni (2022).
3. On the group's early days, see C.R. Lister (2016).
4. Maher (2016) adds that, in terms of ideology, Jihadis all believe uphold and practice jihad as armed struggle, *takfir* (excommunication of parts of the Muslim community, especially Muslim leaders who fail to implement Islamic law and, in most cases, non-Sunni Muslims), *al-wala' wal-bara'* (loyalty to the Muslims and dissociation from the disbelievers), *tawhid* (a particular approach to monotheism adverse of any practice that Salafis rejects as polytheism), and *hakimiyya* (the sole sovereignty of God).
5. One general definition of Islamist is 'the active assertion and promotion of beliefs, prescriptions, laws, or policies that are held to be Islamic in character' International Crisis Group (2005).

6. The comparison was made by the head of HTS's Sharia Council Abu Abdullah al-Shami in a conference (2021).
7. Kasfir (2015, p. 24) explores rebel governance as a field of inquiry. Additional dimensions of rebel institutional arrangements and ideal types are provided by Mampilly and Stewart (2021), as well as Mampilly (2012).
8. See an overview of Jihadi rebel governance (Lia, 2015). See also existing research on Islamic State's governance (Al-Tamimi, 2015; Revkin, 2020; Zelin, 2016). See also Brenner (2016) and Cook and Maher (2023).
9. For an extensive review of the literature, see Schwedler (2011). See also Robinson (1997), Wickham (2004), Clark (2006) and Schwedler (2006).
10. A forthcoming book explores this theme in more detail, see Haenni and Drevon (2025).
11. As argued in this article, HTS is no longer Jihadi since it renounced many key Jihadi concepts, including *al-wala wal-bara* and *'adam al-isti'ana bil-kuffar* (which both forbid nurturing ties with foreign states such as Turkey), and clamped down on both al-Qaeda and IS in northwest Syria.
12. See previous footnote 4.
13. Transformative governance includes ideologically informed functions that upset pre-existing institutions or norms such as large scale land redistribution or the forced transformation of gender roles or educational programs to reflect a group's political objectives.
14. See his letters in Lahoud (2022).
15. Interviews with leaders of Ahrar al-Sham, HTS, and other smaller Syrian armed opposition groups. Idlib, Antakya, Istanbul, 2019–2024.
16. Interviews with a former prime minister and minister of interior of the salvation government in December 2019 and July 2020, Idlib. Interviews with other armed opposition groups including Ahrar al-Sham, 2017–2022, Istanbul.
17. Interviews prime minister and minister interior, 2019 2020, Idlib.
18. Interviews with independent civil society activists, 2019–2024, Idlib, Istanbul.
19. This is not only true for Jihadis. For instance, see also the importance of ideology in Colombia in Ugarriza and Craig (2013).
20. Interviews with other armed opposition groups, including leaders of Ahrar al-Sham, Idlib and Istanbul, 2018–2023.
21. According to HTS leaders, up to half of Nusra's soldiers left the group, and an additional 25 per cent expressed their neutrality. Interview with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, 2020, Idlib.
22. Lister, Charles. 'How al-Qaida Lost Control of its Syrian Affiliate: The Inside Story.' *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 2 (2018): 1–9; Hassan, Hassan. 'Two houses divided: How conflict in Syria shaped the future of Jihadism.' *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 9 (2018): 1–8.
23. Several al-Qaeda leaders were successively killed, including Abu Faraj al-Masri, Abul-Kheir al-Masri, and Abul-Qassam al-Urduni between 2016 and 2017.
24. Interview with a commander of Hurras al-Din, March 2023.
25. A video released on telegram notably portrayed Abu Shu'ib justifying killing Ahrar al-Sham's members in the head when storming their checkpoints, though HTS then released a communique denouncing it.
26. Interviews with HTS leaders, Idlib, 2019–2024.
27. Interviews with HTS religious scholars including Abu Abdullah al-Shami, the head of its Sharia council. Idlib, 2019–2024.
28. Interviews with HTS leaders, Idlib, 2019–2024.
29. HTS communiqué, 12 July 2022.

30. IS does not refer to the schools of jurisprudence, preferring to declare itself as the ultimate authority endowed with its own interpretation of religious sources.
31. Wide range of interviews with HTS religious scholars and academics at Idlib university. Idlib, 2020.
32. Interviews with HTS religious scholars including Abu Abdullah al-Shami, the head of its Sharia council, Idlib, 2019–2024.
33. Interviews with HTS religious scholars including Abu Abdullah al-Shami, the head of its Sharia council, Idlib, 2019–2024.
34. Interviews with the HTS military leader Abul-Hassan 600, 2021–2024.
35. Interviews with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, Idlib, 2019–2024.
36. Wide range of interviews with the HTS leadership and individuals from the management of the regions, Idlib and northwest Syria, 2020–2023.
37. Interviews with the HTS leadership including Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, Idlib, 2019–2024.
38. Interviews with HTS religious scholars including Abu Abdullah al-Shami, the head of its Sharia council, Idlib, 2019–2024.
39. This is based on the authors' review of dozens of fatwas delivered by the Council of the Fatwa, though this analysis only discusses two fatwas as an illustrative example. The two fatwas are referenced as Majlis al-Ifta (2020).
40. On HTS's management of religious institutions, see also Pierret and Alrefaai (2021).
41. Interview with the minister of religious affairs, Idlib, 2020.
42. Interview with the minister of religious affairs, Idlib, 2020.
43. Interview with the minister of religious affairs, Idlib, 2020.
44. Interview with civil society activists, Idlib, Istanbul, 2019–2020.
45. Interview with civil society activists, Idlib, Istanbul, 2019–2024.
46. Interview with civil society activists, Idlib, Istanbul, 2023.
47. Interview with Idlib prominent families and civil society activists, Idlib, Istanbul, 2024.
48. Interview with Idlib prominent families and civil society activists, Idlib, Istanbul, 2024.
49. Interview with HTS leaders, Idlib, 2023–2024.
50. Interviews with local Christian and Druze communities, northwest Syria, 2019–2024.
51. Interviews with local Druze communities, northwest Syria, 2019–2024.
52. Interviews with local Druze communities, northwest Syria, 2019–2024.
53. Abu Abdullah al-Shami, HTS's religious leader, insisted in an interview that he demanded the execution of Al-Tunsi, but that the judicial committee that settled the case disagreed as it could not directly substantiate that he directly participated in the killing rather than just inciting for violence.
54. Interviews with individuals from the administration of the regions, Idlib and northwest Syria, 2020–2024.
55. Interviews with HTS religious scholars including Abu Abdullah al-Shami, the head of its Sharia council, Idlib, 2019–2024.
56. Interviews with local Christian and Druze communities, Idlib and northwest Syria, 2020–2024.
57. Interviews with local Christian and Druze communities, Idlib and northwest Syria, 2020–2024.
58. So HTS maintains its stance on the Druze as a religious community, rooted in the belief that traditional Islamic jurisprudence opposes numerous

fundamental aspects of their belief systems, while shifting its focus away from the theological. The group instead asserts that what matters is not their theological viewpoint concerning the Druze, but rather the necessity to engage with the Druze as a community that lives alongside them without hostility.

59. Interview with Abu Abdullah al-Shami, Idlib, 2019–2024.
60. This signifies that HTS is not solely conferring the *dhimmi* status upon the Druze or reaffirming the rights of Christians as *dhimmi*. Instead, it is embracing a political stance that is detached from religious concepts.

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