FADIL HANCI

CHANGE IN STRATEGIC CULTURE OF VIOLENT NON-STATE ACTORS: THE CASE OF HTS IN SYRIA

ORTA DOĞU SİYASİ TARİHİ VE ULUSLARARASI İLİŞKİLERİ

İstanbul, 2024

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Advisor: Prof. Dr. VÜGAR İMANBEYLİ

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ÖZ

Stratejik kültür çalışmalarında ezelden beri devlet-merkezli yaklaşımların hakim olageldikleri görülmektedir. Ancak, bu tez, stratejik çalışmalar alanında devlet ve devlet-dışı aktörlük arasındaki geleneksel ayrımın ötesine geçen ve stratejik kültür yaklaşımını şiddet kullanan devlet-dışı aktörlere (violent non-state actors- VNSA) uygulayan yeni gelişmekte olan literatüre katılmakta ve sözkonusu yaklaşımı Suriye'deki Haya't Tahrir el-Şam (HTŞ) örgütüne uygulamaktadır. Devletler ile VNSA'ları eşit aktörler olarak kurgulamayan bu yaklaşım, VNSA'ların doğası ve kendine özgü stratejik mantıklarına dair anlayışımızı zenginleştirmektedir. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma, anlatıları ve stratejileri mezceden stratejik kültür yaklaşımını el-Kaide uzantısı olarak Suriye'de faaliyet gösteren el-Nusra'ya (2013-2016 yılları) ve el-Kaide'den kopuş sonrası dönemde faaliyetine devam eden HTŞ'ye (2017-2023 yılları arasında) uygulayarak örgütün stratejik kültürünün inşası ve dönüşümünü incelemektedir. VNSA'ların hem anlatılarını hem de stratejilerini kapsayan bu stratejik kültür yaklaşımı, anlatının stratejileri yönlendirdiğini veya gerekçelendirdiğini ve ikisinin de iç içe olduğunu varsaymaktadır. Burada anlatı, anlatılan hikayeleri kodlamayla parçalara ayrımadan, bağlamın bütünlüğünü koruma kaydıyla analiz edilmektedir. Bu analiz, tematiktir; bir kısmı karakterler, olay örgüsü, çatışma hikayesi, ilgili aktörler gibi anlatının temel unsurlarını yansıtan temalar üzerinden yapılırken, diğer kısmı VNSA'ların incelenmesinde önemli olan fedakarlık, erillik, 'yakın/uzak düşman' gibi temaları ele almaktadır. Stratejiler ise, nihayetinde varoluşu ve nüfuzu maksimize etmeyi sağlamak üzere siyasi amaçlarla kolektif şiddet kullanımı veya tehdidi olarak incelenmektedir. Tüm bu anlatı ve stratejiler birlikte stratejik kültürü şekillendirmektedir. Bu tez özetle şu görüşleri ileri sürmektedir: El-Nusra'nın stratejik kültürü, el-Kaide'nin stratejik kültürünün Suriye'nin yerel koşullarına uyarlanması sonucu ortaya çıkmıştır; bu da örgütün yerele odaklanmasına ve transnasyonel Cihatçılığa olan ilgisinin kaybolmasına yol açmıştır. El-Nusra'nın HTŞ'ye dönüşümü ise, üç faktörün (ABD öncülüğündeki uluslararası koalisyonun dış baskıları, örgütün yerel müttefiklerinden gelen iç baskılar ve örgüt liderliğinin bunlara verdiği tepkiler) bileşimi sonucunda gerçekleşmiştir. Son olarak, HTŞ'nin stratejik kültürü örgütün yerel devrimci milliyetçiliği benimsemesi ve bunu halihazırda yerelleşmiş Cihatçılık ile birleştirmesi sonucu ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu süreç de şu iki stratejik alt-kültürün var olmasına yol açmıştır: stratejik çevreye bir şekilde uyum sağlayan ve baskın olan yeni nasyonal-İslamcı stratejik alt-kültür, ve bir stratejik eğilim olarak varlığını sürdüren eski Cihatçı alt-kültür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Devlet-dışı Aktörler, Stratejik Kültür, Güvenlik, Hay'at Tahrir el-Şam, Suriye

ABSTRACT

State-centric approaches have been so far dominant in strategic cultural studies. Nevertheless, this thesis joins an emerging literature that moves beyond the traditional division between state and non-state actorness in strategic studies by applying the strategic culture approach to violent non-state actors (VNSAs), particularly Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria. Such an approach does not equate states to VNSAs, it is a lens that enhances our understanding of the nature of the latter and their distinct strategic logics. In this context, this study examines the case of HTS, by using the strategic culture approach of narrative and strategies to its predecessor al-Nusra Front which operated as an al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria between 2013 and 2016, and to the HTS itself in its post-al-Qaeda era between 2017 and 2023 - addressing the formation of and change in the strategic culture of HTS. This strategic culture approach combines the narrative and strategies of VNSAs, assuming that they are interconnected in which the narrative drives strategies or justifies them. The narrative analysis examines the stories told without fragmenting them into codes, preserving the integrity of the context. This analysis is thematic, conducted according to themes that reflect the essential elements of narratives such as characters and plot, the story of the conflict and relevant actors, and themes that are relevant in studying VNSAs such as sacrifice, masculinity, 'near/far enemy' etc. The strategies are studied as the use or the threat of the use of collective violence for political purposes, to ensure survival and maximization of influence of a particular security community. Combined, narrative and strategies shape the strategic culture. This thesis suggests that the strategic culture of al-Nusra is a product of adapting al-Qaeda's strategic culture to the Syrian local setting, resulting in its localized focus and disinterest in transnational jihadism. It points out that the transformation of al-Nusra to the HTS was an outcome of three factors combined, the external pressure from the U.S.-led international coalition, the internal pressure from its local allies, and the leadership's response. Finally, it argues that the strategic culture of the HTS stems from adopting the local revolutionary nationalism and blending it with the already localized jihadism, culminating in two strategic sub-cultures, these are, the newly evolved dominant national-Islamist strategic culture that is somehow in compliance with the strategic environment and the old jihadist sub-culture, a strategic cultural tendency that endures to exist.

Keywords: Violent Non-state Actors, Strategic Culture, Security, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Syria.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AaS: Ahrar al-Sham

AQ: Al-Qaeda

ETIM: East Turkistan Islamic Movement

FSA: Free Syrian Army

HD: Hurras al-Din

HH: Haraket Hazem

HTS: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

IED: Improvised Explosive Device

IR: International Relations

ISIS: Islamic State In Iraq and Syria

JFS: Jabhat Fateh al-Sham

JTS: Jabhat Tahrir Suriya

NDZ: Nour al-Din al-Zenki

NFL: National Front for Liberation

NGO: Non-Government Organization

SIG: Syrian Interim Government

SNA: Syrian National Army

SRF: Syrian Revolutionaries Front

SSG: Syrian Salvation Government

TAS: Tajamu al-Shahbaa

TIP: Turkistan Islamic Party

U.S: United States of America

UN: United Nations

VNSAs: Violent Non-State Actors

WMD: Weapons of Mass Destruction

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, it can be easily observed that the number and influence of violent non-state actors (VNSAs) in the Middle East has increased. The decades-long corrupt and authoritarian governance, the eruptions of civil wars, foreign interventions, and identity grievances have all played crucial roles in the emergence and survival of various VNSAs. It can be argued that the rise of VNSAs has turned into one of the main characteristics that shape the contemporary Middle East, where traditional state principles have been increasingly challenged and claimed by VNSAs. With the decline of central state authority and the rise of VNSAs assuming territorial control and governance roles, the binary division between state and non-state actor actorness has been becoming increasingly blurred[1]. This dynamic is evident in various countries that endured civil wars and foreign intervention including Yemen (Houthis), Lebanon (Hezbollah), Afghanistan (Taliban), and Syria (Hayat Tahrir al-Sam). The latter is the subject of this thesis.

Nevertheless, state-centric approaches have been dominant in shaping the understanding of VNSAs, that is, the assumption that developing strategic thought is a characteristic exclusive to state actors. This assumption suggests that VNSAs are not capable of developing strategic thought due to their lack of rationality and difference in essence from state actors. While this assumption is valid for a wide range of VNSAs that disappear in a very short time, the survival of other VNSAs for decades, such as al-Qaeda[2], let alone the success of many of them to seize territorial control and acts like local governments pose a significant challenge to this assumption. Taking this challenge into account, an emerging literature showcases several works that moved beyond the dominant state-centric approach to global politics incorporating the study of violent non-state actors in strategic culture approaches, a concept that has been traditionally reserved merely to state actors. In this context, one can ask these questions: Do violent non-state actors have a strategic culture? Or, are they capable of developing new ones?

[1] See Renad Mansour and Lina Khatib, "Where is the 'State' in Iraq and Lebanon?", Chatham House, 21 April 2021 (Access: 31 May 2024).
[2] See Richard H. Shultz, *Strategic Culture and Strategic Studies: An Alternative Framework for Assessing al-Qaeda and the Global Jihad Movement* (Florida: The JSOU Press, 2012).

To briefly define the strategic culture, it is a culture of goal-oriented entities, security communities, which explains the motivations and reasons behind the use of force for "political purpose"[3]. To explain further, it is "an integrated system of symbols" that shapes long-standing strategic predispositions by conceptualizing the efficacy of using collective violence and lending these conceptions with an "aura of factuality" that in turn renders the strategic predispositions "seem uniquely realistic and efficacious[4]".

Identity, historical narrative, leadership structure, and "a culturally relative and logical means-ends thought process[5]" are identified as the key requirements for strategic culture. Identity is what shapes the collective consciousness of a particular security community, be it state or non-state, shaping the self-perception of the "strategic us" and "strategic them" along with the nature of this relationship. Identity and ideology lend meaning to a certain collectiveness, maintain motivation, shape the objectives, and drive and justify the operational means. In short, it is the source where the "theory of victory" stems from[6]. The historical narrative is a core element in shaping the strategic perception of security communities in defining enemies, foes, and competitors, as well as developing their "theory of victory" against the perceived enemies[7]. In addition, historical narrative promotes and idealizes certain patterns of behavior, meaning that it influences the worldview and the normative domain, as well as the strategies and actions[8].

The leadership structure is the concrete carrier of the narrative and the definer of the power relations and decision-making processes, the culturally relative means-ends logic. Many violent non-state actors do indeed have leadership structures, and some of them even seized territorial control and established governance[9]. Identity and historical narrative are already the essential reasons for the

[3] Colin S. Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back", *Review of International Studies*, 25/1 (January 1999), 50.
[4] Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture", *International Security*, 19/4 (Spring 1995), 46.
[5] Garrett Pierman, "The Grand Strategy of Nonstate Actors: Theory and Implications", *Journal of Strategic Security*, 8/4 (2015). 71
[6] James M. Smith, "Strategic Culture and Violent NonState Actors: Concepts and Templates for Analysis", *Strategic Culture and Violent NonState Actors: Weapons of Mass Destruction and Asymmetrical Operations Concepts and Cases* (Colorado: USAF Institute for National Security Studies USAF Academy, 2008), 7.
[7] Juan Castillo, "Cultural Irregular Warfare: The Crossroads between Strategic Culture and Non-Kinetic Strategies employed by Non-State Actors", *Canadian Military Journal*, 12/3 (Summer 2012), 26.
[8] Richard H. Shultz, *Strategic Culture and Strategic Studies: An Alternative Framework for Assessing al-Qaeda and the Global Jihad Movement* (Florida: The JSOU Press, 2012), 11.
[9] Marta Furlan, "Understanding Governance by Insurgent Non-State Actors: A Multi-Dimensional Typology", *Civil Wars*, 22/4 (June 2020), 478-511.

emergence of politically motivated VNSAs. In the case of jihadist VNSAs, identity and historical grievances, derived from the colonial and post-colonial eras, are among the essential factors behind their emergence[10]. Altogether, identity, historical narrative, and leadership structure constitute the key requirements of strategic culture. Therefore, VNSAs that possess these key requirements are capable of developing strategic culture and thus are subjectable to strategic cultural analysis.

Applying the strategic culture approach to VNSAs equates neither them nor the content of their strategic culture to state actors or their strategic cultural domain. Such application stems from the necessity of expanding our understanding of the nature of the VNSAs in the realm of global politics by moving beyond the traditional binary division between state and non-state actorness. In other words, while one should rethink the old assumptions on the binary division of state and non-state actorness paving the way for new approaches to evolve and contribute to our understanding of VNSAs, such approaches should not dilute the very concept of state, which is the primary actor of international relations.

In this context, this work aims to contribute to the existing literature on strategic culture and violent non-state actors by applying the strategic culture analysis on Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria. The HTS was formed under the name of al-Nusra Front in January 2012, aiming at overthrowing the Assad regime and establishing an "Islamic Emirate." In the early phase of the conflict, al-Nusra relied on the "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" (ISIS) support to operate in Syria, given the former jihadist experience of its foundational group led by Abu Muhammed al-Jawlani (1982), the jihadist veteran who would turn into a warlord surviving more than a decade of shifting dynamics in Syria.

In April 2013, al-Nusra refused to merge with the ISIS following the latter's announcement of it as an affiliate in Syria, opting for pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda (AQ) instead. Al-Nusra counted on al-Qaeda's name to preserve its jihadist legitimacy and assistance to counter the growing influence of ISIS in Syria. Nevertheless, the growing external pressure stemming from the air strikes conducted by the U.S.-led international coalition to defeat the ISIS, and the internal pressure from the local Syrian armed groups who did not share transnational jihadist interests prompted al-

[10] Peter Sluglett, "Introduction: Violent Non-State Actors in the Arab World: Some General Considerations", V*iolent Radical Movements in the Arab World: The Ideology and Politics of Non-State Actors*, eds. Peter Sluglett and Victor Kattan (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 1.

Nusra to break up ties with the al-Qaeda in July 2016. This date marks the beginning of a transformation process for the former al-Qaeda affiliate from a jihadist armed group into a localized hybrid insurgency.

The case of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and what it stands for has always been controversial and debatable. In the very beginning, the designation of al-Nusra by the U.S. as a terrorist group was rejected by the Syrian National Council which was the political umbrella of the Syrian opposition across the ideological spectrum as their focus on the brutality of the regime made them oblivious to the strategic threat posed by al-Nusra. In July 2017, the successor of the National Council, the Syrian National Coalition, denounced the violations committed by the HTS against civilians calling on Syrian factions to unite against the 'extremist forces' after HTS's intentions to dominate the Syrian insurgency became clear[11].

Researchers studying the HTS have had different views as well. For instance, in March 2015, Lina Khatib argued that "instead of putting Nusra and the Islamic State in the same basket, the West should look beyond the Nusra Front's ideological affiliation and encourage its pragmatism[12]". In 2017, Sam Heller argued that the HTS's divorce from al-Qaeda, and the "strategic differences" with its leadership "do not necessarily mean Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has revised or moderated its ideology, and the group's real planning and intentions are unknowable[13]." Furthermore, Fabrice Balanche argued that the HTS should be internationally countered in "the same comprehensive approach" pursued against the ISIS in Syria and elsewhere[14].

Having the HTS consolidated its territorial control, several researchers began to address the possibility of political engagement with it. In 2021, Jerome Drevon and Patrick Haenni advocated for conditional engagement with the HTS that entails two primary issues: "HTS's human rights

[11] "Al-I'tilaf Yudin Mumarisat 'Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham' wa I'tida'atihā 'ala al-Madaniyyin" [The Coalition Condemns 'Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's' Practices and Attacks on Civilians], *Etilaf*, 20 July 2017 (Access: 25 March 2024).
[12] Lina Khatib, *"The Nusra Front's Game-Changing Rise in Syria"*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 24 March 2015 (Access: 25 March 2024).
[13] Sam Heller, "The Strategic Logic of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 11/06 (December 2017), 139-152.
[14] Fabrice Balanche, *"Preventing a Jihadist Factory in Idlib"*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 31 August 2017 (Access: 25 March 2024).

track record and a clarification of its long-term vision for a political solution in Syria[15]". On the other hand, other researchers still view HTS through the lens of al-Nusra. In this sense, two Syrian researchers, Rahaf Aldoughli and Azzam Al Kassir, criticized the "cold geopolitical assessments that justify negotiating with warlords" arguing that any engagement with the HTS should be "limited and conditional to prevent Syrians from being crushed by al-Jawlani's authoritarian ideology[16]".

Finally, Aaron Y. Zelin, argues that "the smartest policy would be to continue with the current designation until the HTS makes more changes". While recognizing that the HTS is unlikely to meet American expectations, Zelin introduced a set of conditions that should be considered by the U.S. to request from the HTS in return for changing the latter's designation[17]. Neither the question of the designation of the HTS as a terrorist group nor making policy recommendations are part of this work's scope. Nevertheless, the debate highlights different perspectives on the HTS and its transformation process demonstrating why the HTS, its jihadist past, and its transformation are still worthy subjects of inquiry.

In this sense, this thesis studies the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in its post-al-Qaeda era as well as its jihadist past during al-Nusra's period, through the lens of strategic culture, arguing that neither the HTS's jihadist past nor its transformation should be overlooked or overestimated. It aims to provide a different perspective on the trajectory of the evolvement and transformation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham from a jihadist group into a hybrid insurgency, and further expand the literature on strategic culture and violent non-state actors.

This study's main contribution to the literature is the focus on the topic of change in the strategic culture of VNSAs. In this sense, it attempts to open a new venue in the emerging literature, as to the best of my knowledge, there have not been comprehensive works on the matter. In addition, it

[15] Jerome Drevon and Patrick Haenni, "How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads: The Case of HTS, the Former AQ Franchise in Syria", European University Institute, January 2021 (Access: 31 March 2024).
[16] Rahaf Aldoughli and Azzam Al Kassir, "Empower Syrians Not Warlords: Against the Re-Branding of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham", *Atlantic Council*, 15 July 2021 (Access: 25 March 2024).
[17] The conditions include holding general elections, dissolving the HTS and its armed wing into its civil wing, the Syrian Salvation Government, and the resignation of the historical leadership before holding themselves accountable for war crimes. See Aaron Y. Zelin, *The Age of Political Jihadism: A Study of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield 2023). 73-75.

is also the first strategic culture analysis applied to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its transformation process adding a new perspective to the rich literature on HTS. Lastly, this study also provides a comprehensive narrative analysis entailing new data, that is, the speeches of the leader of the HTS, which will be elaborated on in the sources part.

In terms of the scope of this work, it studies the strategic culture of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham by examining the narrative and strategies. The narrative analysis examines only the speeches and interviews of the HTS's leader, Abu Muhammed al-Jawlani. The strategies examine the operational and tactical means employed by the HTS to achieve objectives, survive, and expand influence. The temporal scope of the study covers a period of eleven and a half years, between January 2012 which marked the formation of al-Nusra and June 2023. In terms of the spatial scope of this work, it primarily covers Syria where the HTS has operated throughout the conflict, yet it extends to cover Lebanon between 2013 and 2017, given al-Nusra's attempts to expand its influence there, which would ultimately fail.

It should be noted that this work has limitations. The narrative analysis examines only the speeches of the HTS's leader, al-Jawlani, and it incorporates neither speeches of other figures nor statements of the group itself. Nevertheless, such limitation has its reasons. First, al-Jawlani represents a new phenomenon in comparison with other jihadist groups' leaders in how he crafted his persona throughout the conflict, from a clandestine jihadist figure who communicated with his group through audio messages, covered his face in his early media interviews during al-Nusra's period, to crafting a political persona with which he engages with local notables, attends inauguration events, ceremonies, etc. Second, it is the theoretical assumption that assumes a significant role of the leadership structure in strategic culture change, where al-Jawlani is not only the head of chains of command within the HTS, but also the most prominent media figure and perhaps the last-standing commander among the core group that founded al-Nusra after the killing of his jihadist comrade, Abu Maria al-Qahtani, in an explosion in May 2024 – an incident that is out of the temporal scope of this work. In this sense, this study examines the narrative of HTS by analyzing the speeches of its leader.

Taking into consideration the abovementioned context, this thesis puts forward the following main research question:

1 How has the strategic culture of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham evolved throughout the trajectory of the Syrian conflict?

Besides the main question, two sub-questions are also asked:

a) Why and how did al-Nusra transform into Hayat Tahrir al-Sham changing its strategic cultural codes?

b) How does the strategic culture of HTS differ from its predecessor al-Nusra's strategic culture?

Regarding the structure of the thesis, the first chapter lays the theoretical and conceptual groundwork for applying strategic culture analysis to the HTS, giving insight into the conceptions and typologies of VNSAs, the evolvement of strategic culture studies, the relation between narrative and behavior, and the factors that shape change in the strategic culture of a certain security community. Most importantly, it provides a brief review of the literature on strategic culture and violent non-state actors. Despite the invaluable works that have opened a new avenue for research, this emerging literature is still limited demonstrating the necessity of conducting further case studies, including ones that address the issue of change in the strategic culture of VNSAs.

The second chapter explores the narrative and strategies of al-Nusra. Here the narrative is an analysis of the speeches and the media interviews of the leader of al-Nusra, Abu Muhammed al-Jawlani, between January 2012 and April 2016. It is a thematic narrative analysis incorporating ten themes: Characters and plot, Sharia and "Islamic Emirate", historical victimhood and conspiracy, politics and political solution, masculinity, sacrifice, solidarity, retribution and reciprocity versus morality, agents of the West, and the folly of the "far enemy". The strategies explain how the group operated on the ground to ensure survival and maximize influence under four sub-sections. These are: targeting the near enemy(s): a domestic focus strategy, regionalization: a failed strategy, localization: integration into the local setting, and insurgency. The combination of the narrative and strategies reveals the key characteristics of the strategic culture of al-Nusra, including the strategic cultural flexibility, and the strategic resilience.

The third chapter analyzes the narrative and strategies of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in its post-al-Qaeda era between January 2017 and June 2023, taking into consideration its jihadist past and influence on the group. This thematic narrative analysis examines eight themes: Characters and plot, revolution and jihad, model and strategic planning, fighting and building, integration, politics and political solution, unity, and sacrifice. The strategies section entails four themes: Persuasion and coercion to enforce its hegemony, institutionalization and governance, challenging the constraints of the strategic environment, and hybrid insurgency.

By analyzing the narrative and strategies of the HTS while concurrently using comparison to detect and highlight change or continuity on the two levels, the chapter concludes with the key characteristics of the strategic culture of the HTS, including hybrid identity and strategic patience. The conclusion provides the overall findings on the evolvement of the strategic culture of Hayat Tahrir al-Sam throughout the trajectory of the Syrian conflict and links them with the theoretical conceptions of the current literature of strategic culture and violent non-state actors, particularly change in the strategic culture of VNSAs. It argues that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, after transformation, possesses two strategic sub-cultures, the evolving dominant national-Islamist one and the suppressed jihadist one, in which the newly evolving strategic culture is more in compliance with the strategic environment.

This work has benefited from a wide range of primary and secondary sources. These sources can be grouped into four clusters:

a) The primary sources of the narrative. These are the speeches and media interviews of Abu Muhammed al-Jawlani, the leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. These speeches and interviews were collected by the author in two different ways. The first one is by directly listening and transcribing the speeches that are available online, such as the ones published by the HTS-associated media outlet, *Amjad Media,* or the media interviews conducted by *Aljazeera Arabic*. The second one is taking advantage of the already transcribed speeches, particularly the old ones that were originally released by al-Nusra's *al-Manara al-Bayda* media outlet[18] or the transcript of the interview of al-

[18] These speeches were transcribed by *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya,* an Islamist online library. The author checked the accuracy of the transcription by checking a sample of the original speeches that are still available online. See: *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya, https://ketabonline.com/ar*

Jawlani with the Frontline media outlet. The process of collecting and ensuring the accuracy of the transcripts was highly challenging and time-consuming, and so was the process of translating the selected quotations from Arabic to English, which are analyzed in the narrative sections of chapters two and three. In addition, the original quotations are provided in Appendix A and Appendix B and referred to in the footnotes, which enables the readers to easily reach the relevant original raw materials while reading the main text. The extensive raw materials collected and translated can also be useful for researchers interested in discourse analysis.

b) The books and academic articles that are used in writing the theoretical framework of strategic culture including the works of Jack Snyder, Colin S. Gray, Alastair Iain Johnston, Robin Luckham, Elizabeth Kier, Alan Bloomfield, Theo Farrell and Terry Terriff, Aaron P. Jackson, Barry R. Posen, Richard H. Shultz, Garrett Pierman, James M. Smith, Edward D. Last, etc.

c) The books and think tank reports, that were used in writing the strategies sections in chapters two and three including the works of Charles Lister, Jennifer Cafarella, Aaron Y. Zelin, Jerome Drevon and Patrick Haenni, the report titled "Containing Transnational Jihadists in Syria's North West[19]", etc.

d) The secondary sources. These are, the news reports published by news agencies and news websites including *Associated Press, Reuters, Aljazeera, Anadolu Agency, Eneb Baladi* (a Syrian media outlet)*, Syria TV,* etc. These secondary sources made it possible to track specific events, issues, and details that enriched this study.

It should be also pointed out that this thesis was inspired by the work of Edward D. Last[20] who developed the strategic culture approach of narrative and practices and applied it to the al-Qaeda and the al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb comparing the strategic culture of the mother jihadist organization to its local affiliate, opening an avenue for using this approach and apply it on other violent non-state actors. This work uses the same strategic culture approach of narrative and

[19] The report is published by the International Crisis Group. The author(s) are anonymous.
[20] Edward David Last, Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors: A Comparative Strategic Cultural Analysis of Al-Qaida and Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (Southampton, University of Southampton, School of Social Sciences, PhD Thesis, 2018).

strategies and applies it to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its predecessor al-Nusra. Nevertheless, the comparative tool is not used to compare two different organizations, but rather to track changes in narrative and strategies and thus to track the evolvement and change of the strategic culture of the HTS.

In studying the narrative and behavior, this work rejects Alastair Iain Johnston's positivist approach of divorcing culture from behavior[21]. Instead, it adopts an interpretivist approach, assuming that the cultural domain and behavioral patterns are interconnected and their interaction formulates the strategic culture. In this sense, this study adopts Colin S. Gray's conception of strategic culture as comprised of narrative and strategies in which the beliefs and thoughts influence decisions and practices which in turn reinfuse the culture with learned experiences. However, this work does not exclude the conception of culture as an instrument for justifying behaviors driven by the self-interests of decision-makers, an argument defended by scholars referred to as the "second generation" of strategic culture[22].

One can easily argue that the assumption that culture or narrative can concurrently serve both as a driver and justifier of behavior is incoherent. As Gray argued, to elaborate, strategically encultured decision-makers or institutions make all the operational, tactical, and strategical decisions that simply can render culture as a driver of behaviors. But at the same time behaviors can be triggered by other internal and external factors i.e. the objective conditions of the strategic environment and/or mere self-interests of decision makers. Solving this dilemma requires understanding strategic culture as a "context that can provide understanding of what behavior means", and "to move on to a creative accommodation of the two[23]", the culture and behavior. Thus, the necessity to also recognize the role of culture or narrative as instrumental is crucial. In cases where behaviors or decisions are triggered by the strategic environment or self-interests, they are justified by the narrative which culturally processes them and reinfuses the culture with newly learned experiences. In both cases, culture and behaviors are interconnected, influence each other, and shape the nature of the strategic culture of security communities, VNSAs in this work.

[21] Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995).
[22] Colin S. Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back", *Review of International Studies*, 25/1 (January 1999), 54
[23] *ibid*, 68 and 69.

Applying the narrative as a method of analysis is inspired by the model developed by Edward D. Last[24], that is, processing the text as a context where the story is not fragmented into codes, but maintains its integrity to answer the questions of what is told? And why it is told? The narrative possesses a unique structure through which "sense is achieved". This structure is composed of actors or characters, plot and time, and setting and space[25]. The narrative in this study is strategic, it reflects the worldview of a particular political actor, that is, the plot, values, and objectives[26]. The strategic narrative is a carrier of a sequence of events and identities, a communication channel through which political actors seek to give distinct meaning to the past, present, and future in line with their political objective. It is "a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate[27]". Strategic narratives are not necessarily rational or fact-based, they can be emotional including historical analogies[28].

Taking the abovementioned conceptions into account, the themes of the strategic narrative are defined according to several parameters. The characters and plots, as aforementioned, are essential elements of the narrative, they give meaning to the past, present, and future of the conflict and categorize the friends and enemies in line with the political objective of the actor. Narrative themes such as Sharia, "Islamic Emirate", "near enemy", "far enemy"[29], sacrifice[30], masculinity[31], etc. are already relevant topics for scholars studying jihadist VNSAs. Other narrative themes such as solidarity, victimhood, reciprocity, etc. are borrowed from the Last's work on the narrative of al-Qaeda and its affiliate Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)[32]. Lastly, narrative themes including fighting and building, revolution and jihad, unity, etc. are formulated based on the author's observation during the data collection process.

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[24] Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors, *ibid.*
[25] Daniel Leonard Bernardi *Et al*., *Narrative Landmines: Rumors, Islamist Extremism, and the Struggle for Strategic Influence* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2012)
[26] Laura Roselle *Et al.*, "Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power", *Media, War & Conflic*t, 7/1 (2014). 76.
[27] Alister Miskimmon *Et al.*, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York & London: Routledge, 2013). 2 and 7.
[28] Lawrence Freedman, "The Transformation of Strategic Affairs", *The Adelphi Papers,* 45/379 (2006). 22.
[29] Fawaz A. Gerges, *"The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global"* (New York: Sarah Lawrence College, 2009).
[30] Harvey Whitehouse, Dying for the Group: Towards a General Theory of Extreme Self-Sacrifice." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences,* 41 (February 2018).
[31] Aleksandra Dier and Gretchen Baldwin, "Masculinities and Violent Extremism", *International Peace Institute and UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED)*, June 2022 (Access: 2 June 2024).
[32] Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors, *ibid.*

Strategies are defined in line with the 'historical' school of strategic thought, assuming that there are common elements of strategy in all periods, geographies, and the use of technologies in which the nature of war does not change despite the distinct forms that it might take in different political or tactical contexts. Strategy is "about the theory and practice of the use, and threat of use, of organized force for political purposes[33]." Violent non-state actors can possess the sophistication and organizational capacity to develop strategic thoughts and strategies[34]. They employ the means of violence to achieve political objectives, formulating distinct patterns of behavior that are interconnected with their strategic narrative shaping their strategic culture.

This study argues that VNSAs are more prone to strategic culture change and that changes in the strategic environment including internal and external pressure and the response of leadership structure are defining factors in shaping the trajectory of such change. Nevertheless, such change is not absolute i.e. the newly emerging strategic culture can still entail aspects of the old one, which can amount to the existence of two strategic sub-cultures, the newly emerging dominant strategic sub-culture and the suppressed one, where a change in the strategic environment or leadership can reverse the change or trigger a new one.

[33] Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). 1.
[34] Richard H. Shultz, *Strategic Culture and Strategic Studies: An Alternative Framework for Assessing al-Qaeda and the Global Jihad Movement* (Florida: The JSOU Press MacDill Air Force Base, 2012), 2.

CHAPTER ONE

1 STRATEGIC CULTURE: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs)

Violent non-state actors (VNSAs) have played key roles in the security and international relations fields of the Middle East. Grievances derived from the colonial and post-colonial eras, the unstable nature of the Middle Eastern national states, and the encouragement of the Salafist-Jihadist ideology by some powers are crucial reasons behind the emergence and presence of violent non-state actors in the Middle East[35]. Violent non-state actors are armed groups that enjoy the willingness and the ability to use violence as a method to achieve their objectives without being structurally integrated into state actors' security or military institutions[36]. Violent non-state actors can be categorized by defining their following characteristics: primary motivation including objectives, methods used to achieve these objectives, organizational structure including hierarchy and recruitment methods, funding methods, and the scope and potential impact[37].

The spectrum of non-statist actorness differs from state actorness by various criterions. How autonomous VNSAs are from states and statism principles? To what extent do they rely on state support and to what degree they can survive state persecution? And how sovereign-free are these actors? Along with the autonomy question, the element of representation is crucial. This includes the identity question, the ability and capacity to recruit and maintain members. There is also the question of the influence of VNSAs and how sustainable can this influence be? Sustainable impact of VNSAs is mainly related to how deterrent-free they are and their flexibility and adaptability. This influence has two aspects: a compelling aspect that compels state(s) to explicitly or implicitly recognize a VNSA as a result of inability to ignore its position anymore, and a transformative

[35] Peter Sluglett, "Introduction: Violent Non-State Actors in the Arab World: Some General Considerations", V*iolent Radical Movements in the Arab World: The Ideology and Politics of Non-State Actors*, ed. Peter Sluglett and Victor Kattan (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019), 1.
[36] Ulrich Schneckener, "Fragile Statehood, Armed Non-State Actors and Security Governance", *Private Actors and Security Governance*, ed. Alan Bryden and Marina Caparini (Berlin: LIT Verlag Münster, 2006), 25.
[37] Natasha Ezrow, *Global Politics and Violent Non-state Actors* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2017), 90-91.

aspect that may changes practices or policies of state(s) or makes a specific change in the sovereignty order of a particular state through overthrowing the government, dividing the country, claim autonomy, etc.[38]

Violent non-state actors are most likely different from state actors in respect to the following characteristics: (1) the likeliness not to be influenced by diplomacy, threats of economic sanctions or force, (2) the absence of a population to correspond to, (3) the irregular and illegal trade connections, (4) the lack of international legitimate status, (5) the lack of a national interest objective and preference of insecure and unstable environments[39]. In parallel with similarities among violent non-state actors, they become different on various levels: (1) the position toward the status-quo: some VNSAs seek a radical change while others seek to consolidate the incumbent status, (2) the territoriality question: the willing and ability to conquer and control a specific territory, (3) the type and the objective of violence: the use of violence is either physical aims at weakening/defeating the opponent's military or psychological aims at intimidating the opponent, (4) the primary motivation: VNSAs are either motivated by grievances aspired political objectives or by greed pursuing economic objectives. Nevertheless, this classification is not absolute as many VNSAs undergo transformation processes through the trajectory of a conflict[40]. Guerrilla fighters, militias or paramilitaries, warlords, terrorist organizations, criminal mafia, as well as mercenaries and private security companies are all violent non-state actors that vary in their motivations, objectives, and the means they use to achieve these objectives[41].

1.2 Evolution of Strategic Culture Studies

The concept of strategic culture is a product of the concept of political culture, which has been widely debated and employed in different areas since the 1950s[42]. Strategic culture was first introduced as a concept by the American political scientist Jack Snyder in his work "The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations" in 1977. He crafted the concept

[38] Ersel Aydınlı, *Violent Non-State Actors From Anarchists to Jihadists*, (Oxfordshire: Routledge 2016), 8 and 19.
[39] Ezrow, *"Global Politics and Violent Non-state Actors"*, 60-62.
[40] Schneckener, "Fragile Statehood, Armed Non-State Actors and Security Governance", 28-31.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Colin S. Gray, "Comparative Strategic Culture", *The US Army War College Quarterly*: Parameters 14/1 (April 1984), 27.

by building on the concept of political culture explaining the role of culture as a defining element of strategic thinking and the absence of mere objective policymaking[43]. Scholars of strategic culture have adopted distinctive views on the definition of strategic culture, the relationship between normative domains(discourse, beliefs, values, culture, etc.), and the operational attitudes, behaviors and actions. Three generations of scholars introduced different models and conceptualizations of strategic culture.

1.2.1 The First Generation

The first generation of strategic culture was mainly composed of four scholars: Jack L. Snyder, Colin Gray(1943-2020), Carnes Lord, David R. Jones[44]. The first generation had been mainly concerned with strategies of the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War era and the role of culture as a major influence in (re)shaping distinctive national strategies.

Jack L. Synder, the famous IR scholar who crafted the concept of strategic culture, used the concept to explain the cultural predispositions of Soviet strategic thought which carry weight in defining the behavior of the Soviet Union in a potential nuclear escalation with the United States. He elaborated on how strategists, Americans and Soviets, are not culture-free. "Soviet and American doctrines have developed in different organizational, historical, and political contexts, and in response to different situational and technological constraints[45]." Strategic culture is a product of different organizational, historical, and political variables and it carries crucial weight in defining the behavior in the response to different capacity and capability limitations on the tactical level[46].

David Jones criticized Synder's works as the latter, according to Jones, narrowed the discussion down merely to nuclear strategy, and reduced the historical legacy of the Soviets, in practice, to the Soviet experience in World War Two and to the political experience that stemmed from the party-military relations under Stalin's rule - without adequately taking into consideration the

[43] Jack Snyder, Rand Cooperation, "The Soviet Strategic Culture : Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations" (Access 23 June 2023)
[44] Lawrence Sondhaus, *Strategic Culture and Ways of War* (Oxfordshire: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2006), 7.
[45] Snyder, "The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations", V.
[46] Snyder, "The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations", V.

influence of the former Russian Empire. In this sense, Jones considered that assessing the Soviet's strategic culture might be only possible through recognizing its forming process, that is, a merger of the experiences of Soviets as rulers of the new Russian Empire, the political culture of Marxism-Leninism, and the military culture of the pre-1917 Bolshevik Revolution. By theorizing based on the Soviet model, Jones introduces three levels of elements and factors that shape the strategic culture of any nation. These are: (1) geography, ethnic culture, and history; (2) the socio-economic conditions, the governmental administrative system, and technology; (3) the military and the network of military-administrative institutions, and military-political relations[47].

The first generation had also focused on the strategic culture of the United States. In his attempt to explain the dynamics and identify the factors that played a role in shaping the foreign policy and national security policies of the U.S in small-scaled wars, Lord Carnes, the author of American Strategic Culture in Small Wars, used the strategic-cultural approach as a framework inclusive of wide-range of variables. These variables are: geopolitics, international relationships, political culture and social structure, military culture-history, traditions and education, civil-military relations, and technology. This extreme inclusion of a wide range of themes sparked criticism from third generation theorists based on how to isolate the effects of strategic culture from other approaches - which will be discussed later. Despite the fact that Carnes did not narrow down the scope of strategic culture's content, he did precisely reject any deterministic approach regarding the role of culture patterns in defining behavior[48].

Colin Gray, the prominent scholar of the first generation, argued that the unique American historical experience has produced an American way in strategy and thus a distinct American strategic culture influencing the making of nuclear strategy and its related policies. The American strategic culture encompasses opposed tendencies, that is, an "oscillation between under- and over-preparedness, between wishful thinking and Manichaeanism[49]." Gray illustrates the making of this dynamic with the following three factors that were crucial in shaping the American strategic

[47] David R. Jones, "Soviet Strategic Culture", *Strategic Power: United States of America and the U.S.S.R.*, ed. Carl G. Jacobsen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), 37-46. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-20574-5_3
[48] Carnes Lord, "American strategic culture in small wars", *Small Wars and Insurgencies,* 3/3 (November 2007), 207. https://doi.org/10.1080/09592319208423024
[49] Colin S. Gray, "National Style in Strategy: The American Example", *International Security*, 6/2 (Fall 1981), 45-46. https://doi.org/10.2307/2538645

culture: (1) The insular nature of the American political culture, which stems from the geographic insularity, with a permanent expectation of safety that makes a potential foreign threat expected to be "immediate and massive" and leads to an excessive military response based on an overestimation of the threat. (2) The ahistorical sense of policymaking in the areas of national security in the U.S, where policymakers judge international events without the historical context based, solely, on the contemporary conditions and personal experiences. (3) In parallel with the lack, even the absence to a large extent, of a historical sense in policymaking, there is a proclivity to focus on domestic matters at the expense of foreign matters within the American educational system which makes policy experts "ill-equipped" to cope with foreign states including the Soviet Union. Gray argued that strategic culture, as a concept, is policy-neutral and the study of the concept "should enable us [Americans] better to understand ourselves, better to understand others, and (scarcely less important) better to understand how others interpret us[50]."

The study of strategic culture, according to Gray, is not solely an examination of thought, belief and attitude, but also their reflection on behavior and practice. Distinctiveness in thought and behavior of strategic culture among nations and states is the core issue behind the whole debate on the concept. Yet, this distinctiveness is not absolute. The "unduly simple appreciation" of this critical aspect should not make it inevitable to ignore the existence of congruent traits among distinctive strategic cultures, and the prospect of distinctive strategic subcultures accommodated by the main strategic culture[51].

The main concern of cultural strategists of the first generation was to explain the differences between the American and the Soviet strategies, and thus policies, through a cultural-historical analysis. The dynamics of the Cold War era including the nuclear rivalry and its threat had been the fundamental motivation behind introducing culture to strategy aiming at equipping the American policy-making processes with a cultural-historical analysis dimension to better understand and cope with the Soviet Union. They assumed that culture and behavior are interconnected wherein discourse and beliefs influence the decision and policy-making which, in turn, (re)infuse the culture as a learned experience.

[50] Ibid, 45-46.
[51] Gray, "Comparative Strategic Culture", 27.

1.2.2 The Second Generation

The second generation of scholars in strategic culture studies affirmed the aspect of the distinctiveness of the strategic culture of each state, however, they did not agree on its determining or influencing factors for policy and decision-making. Instead, second generation theorists, such as Bradley Klein and Robin Luckham, argued that culture serves as an instrument for justifying the policies of decision-makers, mainly derived by self-interest.

Klien uses strategic culture to explain the defining dynamics and factors of the evolvement of the U.S. national security and defense strategies. Strategic culture, in this sense, is the "power projection" of the geographically insular country, that is, the expansion of military forces well and far beyond national borders[52]. This power projection, known as extended deterrence, was exported not merely as a security strategy to contain the Soviet threat, but rather as an aspiring ambition for global hegemony. In this sense, Klien stated that "Both as a specific military strategy and as a more general cultural orientation, the United States erected a security framework for post-war economic and political reconstruction and the internationalization of liberal capital under multilateral terms[53]."

Klein considered the military strategy as a cultural practice behavior in which national states legitimize some military means to preserve and reproduce their "way of life[54]." The concept encompasses two aspects of "hegemony", these are, a historicization of realist hegemony and a reproduction of the political hegemony of Gramsci. The war-making style, stemming from the accumulated strategic traditions of military institutions, is a crucial constituent of strategic culture.

However, the concept is not exclusive to the military and the war-making style. The political public discourse is the determining dimension here by which it plays a role in defining which events are appropriate for military involvement from a strategic-cultural perspective. What constrains the

[52] Bradley S. Klein, "Hegemony and Strategic Culture: American Power Projection and Alliance Defence Politics", *Review of International Studies,* 14/2 (April 1988), 136. https://doi.org/10.1017/s026021050011335x
[53] Klein, *op.cit.* 140.
[54] Klein, 135.

scope of the strategic culture in this regard is the geopolitical position of a particular country along with its relations with other countries, let they be allies or adversaries, both in terms of diplomatic and economic means which, in turn, constrain the domestic political economy of this country. With these constraints recognized by the elites and the public as realities drawing the scope of foreign policy, strategic culture serves as a cultural legitimization of a particular state's violence against "enemies" of culturally excluded identity(ies). In Klien's words, "to study strategic culture is to study the cultural hegemony of organized state violence[55]."

Dwelling on the cultural dimension of war-making style, Luckham suggested that the increasing armament has transformed culture highlighting the significance of objective technological factors in (re)shaping culture and/or strategic culture. Nevertheless, the focus should not be solely devoted to the influence of armament over culture, but, more broadly, to the cultural processing of war. And by culture, he meant three different levels: (1) The mass and/or popular culture as a macro level, (2) certain high sub-cultures such as novels, plays, paintings, films, etc. (3) "Specialized sub-cultures of science, management, and politics." Armament and culture became thoroughly interconnected where the former is now an essential constituent of the cultural production processes both as product and producer interacting in an enduring and complex cultural production circulation[56].

The armament culture, mainly characterized by "weapon fetishism" rooted in capitalism, is a global feature internalized – almost – by all countries. Military parades and their relevant ranks, rituals, marches, and music of any country are, almost, recognizable globally everywhere. Much of the cultural activities including films, soap operas, and news have been infused with armament cultural codes in every continent by which these cultural activities, regardless of geography, look quite similar undertaking topics about war, espionage, and police. Notwithstanding, this similarity is not absolute due to manifold differences flowing from "variations in history and national character," dissimilar political culture and political economics evolved under capitalism and socialism, and the cleavage between different hegemonic formations in the "Third World"[57].

[55] Klein, 136.
[56] Robin Luckham, "Armament Culture", *Alternatives,* 10/1 (January 1984), 2. https://doi.org/10.1177/030437548401000102
[57] Luckham, "Armament Culture", 27.

Both Klien and Lukcham devoted a great deal of attention to a counter-hegemony approach based on pacifist-oriented thinking. Klein argues that the European peace movements have challenged both: the American and the Soviet strategic cultures of power projection and defensive projection, respectively. Aiming at producing an alternative strategic culture, the movement seeks to politicize the debate on strategy from a more global political perspective[58]. At the same time, he stresses that in order for "a counter-hegemonic, post-strategic culture" to evolve, the peace movement needs to broaden the lines of its social movements within and beyond the Atlantic Alliance to be inclusive of those at the periphery of the globe[59].

Luckham, in contrast, emphasized the distinctiveness of the disarmament movement from other sub-cultures in the Western realm as it seeks to challenge and transform the dominant militaristic culture[60]. The way to achieve that rests upon the following two conditions: (1) developing a convincing approach, both for decision-makers and opinion-makers, that disarmament is desirable and practical simultaneously; (2) finding new means capable of granting the support of the mass public which means to counter the armament culture in different areas of cultural production[61].

The second generation of strategic culture was mainly concerned with the domestic and global influence of strategic culture(s), as legitimizing means that have served for advancing hegemony, of the United States and the Soviet Union in particular, to preserve and reproduce a peculiar "way of life." The hegemony aspiration, based on advanced technology that reshapes culture, has left a major impact on most of the cultures/strategic cultures across the globe rendering "armament" a central constituent of, somehow, globalized strategic culture(s).

1.2.3 The Third Generation

The third generation's works in strategic culture studies were based on an in-depth critique of the works of the first and second generations, with different conclusions on the conceptualization and

[58] Klein, "Hegemony and Strategic Culture", 144.
[59] Klein, 145.
[60] Luckham, "Armament Culture", 34.
[61] Luckham, 37.

methodology. The main contribution has been provided by Alastair Iain Johnston, an international relations professor who analyzed the Chinese strategy through cultural-historical analysis[62].

Johnston criticized the first generation's approach on various levels, mainly, the definition of strategic culture and the relationship between culture and behavior. According to Johnston, the first generation could not provide a solid definition of a strategic culture where a wide range of variables are considered relevant to the concept including "technology, geography, organizational culture and traditions, historical strategic practices, political culture, national character, political psychology, ideology, and even international system structure", which make it almost impossible to test a model of choice based on the concept[63].

On the relationship between strategic culture and behavior, Johnston questions the very assumption of the first generation that strategic culture has a measurable and observable influence on strategic choice, suggesting that ruling out the possibility of disjuncture between the two, or instrumentality of the former would be deterministic and unfortunate. He also posed a set of unanswered questions by the first generation regarding the sources of strategic culture, the periods of these sources, the reason why some historical periods are formative of strategic culture, its transmitting process through time, and consistency and change in this regard[64].

As Johnston rejected the first generation's, almost, deterministic approach of strategic culture. He also considered the second generation's approach of the instrumentality of strategic culture as an approach with unanswered questions and unsolved problems. The nature of indecisiveness in whether to expect different strategic behaviors across nations is what renders second generation's approach problematic for Johnston. While the strategic options are limited by the boundaries of the discourse that (de)legitimize options resulting in varying behaviors across nations, there is a great deal of belief in a common militaristic and/or *realpolitik* "strategic preferences" formulated around the duality of "us and them", external threat and zero-sum perception of a conflict. Johnston

[62] Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995).
[63] Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture", *International Security*, 19/4 (Spring 1995), 37. https://doi.org/10.2307/2539119
[64] Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture", 38-39.

asserted that this dilemma can not be solved by the second generation due to the lack of comparative cases studied[65].

Parallel to criticizing the first and second generations of strategic culture, Johnston praised the works of the third generation for avoiding the "determinism" of the first generation leaving behavior out of the scope of strategic culture, and their commitment to testing theories with different explanations against each other. In this context, Johnston drew attention to the works of the political scientists, Jeffery Legro and Elizabeth Kier[66].

Legro tests realism against the organizational-cultural model in the context of the Anglo-German relations during the Second World War arguing that organizational military cultures defined the national priorities and shaped state preferences in cooperation and restraining the use of force[67]. Kier, similarly, tests structural realism, bureaucratic-organizational models, and military culture models in the context of the military doctrines of France and Britain during the interwar period. While the debate on the origins of military doctrines and the nature of offensive and defensive ones has long revolved around rationalist explanations, Kier provided an alternative explanation based on a cultural approach[68].

Johnston sought to build a more rigorous conceptualization of strategic culture by building on the works of the third generation tackling core issues vis-à-vis the definition and the link between strategic culture and behavior. He defined strategic culture as

> "an integrated system of symbols (e.g., argumentation structures, languages, analogies, metaphors) which acts to establish pervasive and long-lasting strategic preferences by formulating concepts of the role and efficacy of military force in interstate political affairs, and by clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the strategic preferences seem uniquely realistic and efficacious[69]."

In this context, he suggests that strategic culture is composed of two levels: (1) the assumptions about the nature of the strategic environment including war and whether it is inevitable or an

[65] Johnston, 40-41.
[66] Johnston, , 41-42.
[67] Jeffrey W. Legro, *Cooperation under Fire: Anglo-German Restraint During World War II* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995).
[68] Elizabeth Kier, "Culture and Military Doctrine: France between the Wars", *International Security*, 19/4 (Spring 1995), 65-93.
[69] Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture", 46.

aberration, threat and whether it is zero-sum or variable-sum, and the efficacy of force use against threats under different conditions; (2) the operational level where the answers of the first level's three questions influence behavioral choices and, thus, a varying offensive or accommodationist strategies take place[70].

The third generation's main concern was to separate culture from behavior in studying strategic culture, proposing an alternative model to those suggested by the first and the second generations. Studying the strategic culture, according to the third generation, requires assessing it as an integrated system of normative codes that define the main assumptions of a particular nation regarding war, the nature of the external threat, and the way of dealing with such a threat; before dwelling on how these assumptions influence the behaviors of the subject states.

1.3 Change in Strategic Culture

Continuity and change in strategic culture have been a significant subject of the debate among scholars of the above-mentioned generations as well as other scholars. Bloomfield, a scholar of international relations, argued that many of the strategic cultural models are constructed in a very "coherent" manner, that is, suggesting "too much continuity" and not placing enough explanations for changes in strategy[71]. This, according to Bloomfield, renders it almost impossible to know why, how, and when changes in strategy may occur[72]. However, the problem of "too much continuity" should not imply an overrating of change in culture and cause a reverse problem that suggests "too little continuity[73]."

[70] Johnston, 46-47.
[71] Alan Bloomfield, "Time to Move On: Reconceptualizing the Strategic Culture Debate", *Contemporary Security Policy*, 33/3 (October 2012), 437. https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2012.727679
[72] Bloomfield, 447.
[73] Bloomfield, 448.

1.3.1 Continuity Versus Change in Strategic Culture

Gray assumed that strategic cultures are amenable to change, though slowly, through absorbing, coding and culturally translating new experiences[74]. Johnston has also held the assumption of the slow nature of change in strategic culture, rendering it "lagging behind changes in 'objective' conditions[75]." Snyder gave credit to the objective conditions changes in triggering changes in strategic culture. However, he asserted a "large residual degree of continuity" over change because of the fact that individuals, including decision-makers, are socialized within a particular strategic discourse and concepts that are amenable to marginal changes over time[76].

The emergence and evolvement of cultures is a natural phenomenon that has been ongoing throughout history involving enormous efforts of many peoples aiming "to explain their past, understand their present, and anticipate their future[77]." Similarly, national political culture, strategic culture and national style in strategy evolve over a long period of time[78]. Cultural norms and beliefs are what make it possible for actors, including the military, to identify themselves and the options and actions to be taken under particular circumstances, and thereby define why change to be carried out and what are the nature and dimensions of such change[79].

Peculiar patterns of behavior become persistent through a cultural production process that involves institutionalization of the cultural norms and behavior over time. This institutionalization guarantees the enduring prevail of these norms either through consented presupposition or enforced by coercive means. The cultural coherence, in this sense, is of high significance in explaining the continuity of particular actions and strategies that do not account for the "strategic and operational circumstances", rendering actors' perception of strategic reality slow to change and cope with the, changing, reality itself[80]. Although culture is a construction, amenable to be "deconstructed and

[74] Colin S. Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back", *Review of International Studies*, 25/1 (January 1999), 52.
[75] Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture", 34.
[76] Rand Cooperation, "The Soviet Strategic Culture : Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations", 9.
[77] Colin S. Gray, "Out of the Wilderness: Prime Time for Strategic Culture", *Comparative Strategy*, 26/1 (May 2007), 9.
[78] Gray, "National Style in Strategy: The American Example", 45.
[79] Theo Farrell and Terry Terriff, "The Sources of Military Change", *The Sources of Military Change: Culture, Politics, Technology*, ed. Theo Farrell and Terry Terriff (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 7.
[80] Farrell and Terriff, "The Sources of Military Change", 7.

reconstructed", it may have a "dysfunctional influence" upon strategy and thus strategic behavior remains static[81].

The tendency for slow change in strategic culture stems from the reliance upon "distinctive burdens of historical and institutional experience, habits of thought and action" that are accumulated through long times of peace. As Klein stated, "In times of peace, strategic cultures have the opportunity to grow, harden, and develop complex and stifling ramifications." The change of objective conditions over time is a reason for "good military establishments" to change or at least attempt to change[82].

The slow nature of change in strategic culture should not imply that strategic culture is unchangeable. Innovation, adaptation, and emulation are three ways of change in the military and thus in strategic culture. Innovation is mainly related to new developments in technology, methods, tactics, and structure[83]. Progress in technology that makes profound changes in war techniques and environment pushes militaries to "develop and adopt new equipment and new methods of using them." At the same time, change does not always mean a total break from the past, as reconstructing certain patterns can incorporate new equipment and maintain a continuous relation with their original or old cultural codes[84]. Military technology and doctrine change can shape cultural continuity in which culture defines the nature and type of response to different developments including technological ones[85].

Adaptation involves capitalizing on previously existing military methods which can lead to innovation when several adaptations occur throughout time resulting in the evolution of new means[86]. The adaptation of new technology and its reflection on change or continuity of doctrine is only meaningful when taken into consideration in the "cultural context[87]." Although strategic

[81] Gray, "Out of the Wilderness", 11.
[82] Yitzhak Klein: "A Theory of Strategic Culture," *Comparative Strategy*, 10/1 (January 1991), 13. https://doi:10.1080/01495939108402827
[83] Theo and Terriff, 6.
[84] Yitzhak Klein, "A Theory of Strategic Culture," *Comparative Strategy*, 13.
[85] Farrell and Terriff, "The Sources of Military Change", 7.
[86] *ibid.*, 6.
[87] Rand Cooperation, "The Soviet Strategic Culture", 9.

culture can be quite adaptable, "security communities" tend to adapt certain strategic ideas or technologies in a culturally distinctive manner[88].

Emulation is importing or borrowing new means of war from other military establishments[89]. By imitating other methods, tactics, and structures, strategic cultures evolve in a unique manner. "Culture is willing and able to borrow what its bearers recognize to be contemporary best practice from abroad[90]." A major change in military and doctrines occurs only if new means and methods that are acquired through innovation, adaptation, and emulation lead to changes in strategies, objectives, and structures[91].

The dynamics and reasons underpinning changes in strategic cultures can be of internal and external variables that give rise to a particular tendency or strategic choice over another. These variables may be internal such as leadership, elite, and debates, or external such as global or regional crisis[92], or traumatic shocks[93]. In other words, internal dynamics including the existing sub-strategic cultures and continuity or change in leadership together with external dynamics such as changes in strategic environment, external shocks, or pressure are what drive strategic culture to change in a particular direction.

1.3.2 Strategic Environment: External Shocks and Objective Conditions

As indicated in the debate above, change in strategic culture can occur due to serious changes in the strategic environment and external shock or pressure. Strategic cultures have the potential to evolve or shift drastically when it is struck by a "traumatic shock[94]." Political and economic shocks compelled militaries in the region of the former Soviet Union to be restructured to respond to the newly appeared conditions. The changes in strategic environment including the end of the Cold War, its economic repercussions on public policy and pressures on (military) budgets, and the

[88] Gray, "Out of the Wilderness, 15-16.
[89] Farrell and Terriff, "The Sources of Military Change", 6.
[90] Gray, "Out of the Wilderness: Prime", 15-16.
[91] Farrell and Terriff, "The Sources of Military Change", 6.
[92] Johnston, *Thinking of Strategic Culture*, 53.
[93] Gray, "Out of the Wilderness: Prime Time for Strategic Culture", 14.
[94] *ibid*., 14.

revolutionary impact of informational and technological progress on the conduct of military operations have made it inevitable for states to undertake drastic changes, especially in the military[95].

The changes in the strategic environment after 11th September 2001 had also similar effects on the strategic behaviors of states in the Middle East. The U.S-led war on terror, which involved enormous pressure on states in the Middle East to adjust their foreign policy, had resulted in limiting the strategic options and giving rise to a particular or sometimes new strategic tendency. For instance, Pakistan, which had embraced a pro-Taliban policy in Afghanistan between 1994 and 2001 had to alter its policy and abandon its pro-Taliban position in response to the U.S-led global pressure i.e. the external pressure stemming from changes in the strategic environment[96].

The "traumatic effect of war and its consequences" is a major reason for a dramatic change in strategic culture to occur[97]. The ability of states to account for and cope with the changing "strategic, political, budgetary, and technological environments" is what determines their likelihood of achieving national security objectives[98]. Changes in the environment drive militaries to be more willing to consider and adjust strategic thoughts from various sources[99].Traumatic shocks can also trigger a process of cultural change by which the preexisting national system of culture and norms is stripped of its legitimacy in favor of a new emerging one.

The defeat of Germany and Japan in the Second World War, for instance, triggered the development of antimilitarist strategic culture in the post-war periods in these countries[100]. Discrediting core beliefs and values that lead to major shifts in a short period(s) of time occurs as a result of such traumatic experiences, which makes these kinds of changes uncommon[101]. The changes in the strategic environment along with external shocks can also take place concurrently

[95] Farrell and Terriff, "The Sources of Military Change", 3.
[96] Ibrar Khan, "*Pakistan's strategic culture and foreign policy making : a study of Pakistan's post 9/11 Afghan policy change"*(New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2012)., 60-61. İLK HARFLERİ büyük olacak,
[97] Gray, "Out of the Wilderness:", 7.
[98] Farrell and Terriff, "The Sources of Military Change", 3.
[99] Aaron P. Jackson, *The Roots of Military Doctrine: Change and Continuity in Understanding the Practice of Warfare* (Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2013), 33.
[100] Farrell and Terriff, "The Sources of Military Change", 8-9.
[101] John S. Duffield, "Political Culture and State Behavior: Why Germany Confounds Neorealism?", *International Organization*, 53/4 (Autumn 1999), 770.

in shaping the nature of the cultural change. It is either the external shock triggering the process of cultural change, or causing an influential impact on an already initiated cultural change in a particular case[102].

Similarly, changes in the external strategic environment may have direct influence on state identity, that is, external changes pave the way for a "subordinate subculture" to become dominant and implement a strategic change to cope with the changing external conditions[103]. For instance, Japan's long-standing pacifist sub-culture began to undergo strategic behavioral deviations in response to the rise of China as an assertive and nationalistic power by which the former has increasingly engaged in military efforts such as deploying army engineers to Iraq, providing support for the American fleet off Pakistan, and contributing to the anti-piracy mission off Somalia - let alone the accelerating the submarine building program[104]. In such cases, internal and external factors work in line with each other[105], to shape a strategic change that fits internal and external dynamics.

1.3.3 Internal Dynamics: Leadership and Subjective Sub-cultures

Cultures are not a mere reflection of external conditions nor passive subjects to objective circumstances, they have the potential to be independent from external conditions. Yet, one should not ignore the external constraints that may have influence on the content of culture[106]. Nevertheless, in many cases, strategic culture as a historically rooted paradigm places constraints upon the response to the changing external and objective environment, resulting in distinctive "strategic options[107]." The influence of objective factors such as technology and the surrounding environment on behavior is undeniable, however, these factors are not assessed "objectively," but processed through the perspective of strategic culture[108]. As Snyder explained, while the U.S. addressed the problem of the nuclear problem through conceptual filters such as deterrence stability

[102] Farrell and Terriff, "The Sources of Military Change", 8-9.
[103] Bloomfield, "Time to Move On: Reconceptualizing the Strategic Culture Debate", 456-457.
[104] Bloomfield, 455.
[105] Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), 37.
[106] Duffield, "Political Culture and State Behavior", 770.
[107] Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture", 34.
[108] Rand Corporation, "The Soviet Strategic Culture", V.

and crisis management, particularly, the idea of mutually assured destruction as a means to maintain stability; the Soviets were quite hostile to this way of thinking by which their main concern was ensuring the survivability of their own nuclear program as a deterrent without paying attention to the Western abstract sense of stability, or the assured destruction deterrence[109].

Change in strategic culture can occur through a "planned processes of cultural change," that is, mobilizing "ideas and interests behind new beliefs of identity and appropriate behavior[110]." This can be carried out by ambitious and visionary leaders who mobilize support behind a "new theory of victory" introducing change to their organizations[111]. Leadership and organizational culture are interconnected and interactable. Cultural norms and attitudes evolve and transform in line with leadership vision in which leaders define how to address problems, how to cope with new pressures and shocks, the idealized role models, and the profiles of their organization's members. The position of leaders has a major impact on the continuity and change of their organizational culture. Their position can underpin or hinder change and transformation tendencies in times when major shifts in its strategic environments are awaited to be addressed and dealt with[112]. Transformational leaders who seek to achieve planned strategic culture change are usually assisted by military, administrative, and political elites to mobilize and grant the support of the public behind that strategic cultural transformation. For instance, the U.S. military change in the post-Cold War era relied on the efforts of civilian leaders who pushed the military away from old positions and a public opinion that concentrated on drawing the military toward new directions[113].

One can ask whether the planned cultural change is carried out by true believers in the new norms and beliefs or a result of mere instrumental use by leaders and elites. While the former understanding is consistent with the first generation's view on the relationship between culture and behavior as inseparable pillars, the latter understanding is consistent with the second generation's view on the matter whereby culture and discourse have too little to do with behavior and strategic choice.

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[109] Rand Corporation, "The Soviet Strategic Culture", 18.
[110] Farrell and Terriff, "The Sources of Military Change", 8.
[111] Stephen Peter Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (New York: Cornell University Press 1991), 19–21.
[112] Bernard M. Bass, Ronald E. Riggio, *Transformational Leadership* (New York: Psychology Press 2005), 100.
[113] Farrell and Terriff, "The Sources of Military Change", 8 and 12.

To address this dilemma properly, one should put into consideration essential points related to culture and cultural change processes dwelled on by Farrell and Terriff. Firstly, culture, as mentioned previously, is slow to change without experiencing traumatic events which are not common in the first place, meaning that major efforts should be placed to achieve change. Secondly, the attempt of leaders and elites to carry out cultural transformation may be an explicit reflection of certain beliefs and norms they have held implicitly. Lastly, assuming the instrumental use of culture and discourse for the sake of the self-interests of leaders and elites does not change the fact that instrumentality and manipulation of culture may, in fact, lead to change in culture. "Elite rhetoric may stir up beliefs that are genuinely held by community members, and elites may end up 'buying into' their own rhetoric[114]".

The last explanation is quite consistent with Bloomfield's concept of sub-culture. One should accept that various strategic sub-cultures coexist within the broader main strategic culture and compete to influence strategic choices. Strategic sub-cultures exist in changeable power relations i.e. they change positions of dominance and subordination over time[115]. Defining the existing strategic sub-cultures may help in understanding why strategic policy changes and even determine when and which strategic sub-culture may displace the incumbent one and become dominant. Strategic sub-culture understanding, in this sense, makes it easier to predict and trace change on medium and even long-term periods[116]. In Bloomfield's words:

> "These subcultures each present a different interpretation of a state's international social/cultural context – who a state's 'friends' and 'foes' are – which in turn affects how that state interprets the material variables – geography, relative power, technological change, etc. – relevant to strategic decision-making. These different paradigms compete in public discourse for influence over strategic decision-making".

Strategic sub-cultures compete with each other to acquire an assertive position, become dominant, and thus give rise to a certain set of strategic-behavioral options according to their basic strategic culture assumptions, particularly regarding the strategic environment and the nature of threat perception. As already mentioned above, changes in the strategic environment may trigger or

[114] Farrell and Terriff, "The Sources of Military Change", 8.
[115] Bloomfield, "Time to Move On: Reconceptualizing the Strategic Culture Debate". 452.
[116] *ibid*., 454.

underpin change in strategic culture whereby a particular subculture may dominate the paradigm of strategic culture, meaning that internal and external dynamics are interactable and may overlap to produce change in strategic culture. Yet, despite the degree of the external influence in terms of the shocks or changes in the strategic environment on strategic culture, the process of displacing the incumbent dominant strategic culture by a subordinate one has to be carried out by leaders and elites and in a way where change in strategy is mediated culturally.

1.4 Strategic Culture and Violent Non-state Actors

A state-centric approach has so far dominated the discourse on strategy and strategic culture as violent non-state actors, unlike states, are viewed to be incapable of developing strategic thought. The potential that violent non-state actors might actually develop a strategic thought has been, with exceptions though, ignored. A large share of works on terrorism have focused on the "bottom-up" approach, that is, the psychology of and the reasons why individuals become terrorists and by doing so these works do not account for ideas and thoughts of terrorists[117].

The game theory and maximization of utility-based analysis, in contrast, have very little explanatory competence to particular practices such as suicide bombings which obscure attempts to make explanations based on utility or rationality[118]. Yet, the absolute characterization of violent non-state actors as irrational cannot be claimed as accurate, i.e. the nature and contours of their rationality are different from those of state actors, which make them distinctive actors in the realm of global affairs[119]. Understanding their nature and contours of rationality requires a top-down approach to the strategic thoughts of these actors, which are "worthy topics of inquiry in the realm of terrorism analysis[120]."

[117] Mark Stout, "In Search of Salafi Jihadist Strategic Thought: Mining the Words of the Terrorists", *Studies in Conflict andTerrorism*, 32/10 (September 2009), 876-877.
[118] Jerry Mark Long, "Strategic Culture, Al-Qaida, and Weapons of Mass Destruction", *Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors: Weapons of Mass Destruction and Asymmetrical Operations Concepts and Cases* (Colorado: USAF Institute for National Security Studies USAF Academy, 2008), 17.
[119] James M. Smith, "Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors: Concepts and Templates for Analysis", *Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors: Weapons of Mass Destruction and Asymmetrical Operations Concepts and Cases* (Colorado: USAF Institute for National Security Studies USAF Academy, 2008), 3.
[120] Stout, "In Search of Salafi Jihadist Strategic Thought", 876-877.

The fact that strategic culture analysis has not attracted much attention from security and strategy analysts working on violent non-state actors is owing to the very assumption that the former are inherently different in nature from state and their security/military agencies. The clandestine nature of these armed groups that allowed them to exist and operate constituted additional reason for security analysts not to account for the prospect that such groups might have the capacity to undertake strategic discourse and develop strategic thought. In Shultz words: "that the leaders (and rank-and-file members) of armed groups could adhere to a shared body of beliefs and values and incorporate these into a vision and strategic culture was inconceivable to security specialists. They also failed to consider the possibility that an armed non-state group could engage in a strategic studies discourse over core subjects that mirrored those of a state's professional security services. Armed groups were thought to possess neither the sophistication nor the organizational capacity to carry out such activities[121]".

1.4.1 Violent Non-state Actors and the Key Requirements for Strategic Culture

To solve the fundamental issue of the applicability of strategic culture to non-state actors, we should basically look at the required characteristics that enable states to develop and implement strategic culture. These characteristics are identity, historical narrative, leadership structure, and "a culturally relative and logical means-ends thought process[122]." One should not also turn a blind eye on the fact that violent non-state actors may actually achieve varying territorial control over a specific geographical space and thus enable them to slowly acquire some state characteristics[123]. In fact, hybrid warfare has enabled many armed groups to minimize the capacity gap with states. The cases of Tamil Tigers (Sri Lanka), Hezbollah (Lebanon), and the Mexican cartels are evidence of armed groups that managed to do so seeking to maximize the "advantages of asymmetric warfare[124]."

[121] Richard H. Shultz, *Strategic Culture and Strategic Studies: An Alternative Framework for Assessing al-Qaeda and the Global Jihad Movement* (Florida: The JSOU Press MacDill Air Force Base, 2012), 2.
[122] Pierman, "The Grand Strategy of Nonstate Actors", 71.
[123] Richard Shultz, Douglas Farah, and Itamara V. Lochard, *Armed Groups: A Tier One Security Priority*, (Colorado Springs, Colorado: USAF Institute for National Security Studies, 2004), 14.
[124] Juan Castillo, "Cultural Irregular Warfare: The Crossroads between Strategic Culture and Non-Kinetic Strategies employed by Non-State Actors", *Canadian Military Journal*, 12/3 (Summer 2012), 19.

It is also significant to note here that the absence of territorial control does not necessarily account for the absence of a strategic culture that may be still under development. The case of Israel underpins this argument. The notion of Israel that has long been there, the existence of a two basic pillars of strategic culture: the Jewish identity and the historical narrative of a "Jewish homeland in Israel," along with an evolvement of the third pillar, that is, the leadership structure have all resulted in the emergence of Israel as a state[125]. In other words, strategic culture, or at least basic elements of strategic culture, may exist before or without a state being founded.

Identity defines the quintessential element in strategic culture, allows armed groups to make sense of "strategic us" and "strategic them," and the nature of such a relationship[126]. As a nation is considered to be the analysis unit for strategic culture, the "strategic us" of many violent non-state actors does in fact constitute a national narrative. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front(Philippines), the Tamil Tigers, the Basque separatists, the Chechen rebels, and Hamas are all violent non-state and national actors simultaneously given their presence within a state setting, making them appropriate subjects for strategic culture analysis. The same might be applicable for certain versions of al-Qaeda that are positioned within local settings such as in Bali or Morocco[127], or others that have undergone localization processes such as Hayat Tahrir al-sham in Syria, the case study of this thesis.

Identity, along with ideology, is a defining factor in recruitment, use of and transformation to violence, and maintaining motivations. Identity is the source of where the "theory of victory, strategic objectives, and broad operational guidance" stem from[128]. The operational narrative of violent non-state actors is a reflection of the group's identity, which provides legitimization to the group's behaviors and actions, most prominently, the use of violence against its defined enemies[129].

Narratives, including national and historical ones, are one of the most crucial "internal cultural devices" that not only enable VNSAs to determine their enemies, foes, and competitors; but also

[125] Garrett Pierman, "The Grand Strategy of Non-state Actors: Theory and Implications", *Journal of Strategic Security*, 8/4 (Winter 2015), 72.
[126] Smith, "Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors", 3.
[127] Long, "Strategic Culture, Al-Qaida, and Weapons of Mass Destruction", 18.
[128] Smith, "Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors", 7.
[129] Smith, 10.

qualifies them to develop a theory of victory against these enemies. Moreover, narratives provide VNSAs with a lens through which they define their relation to the "civilian populations and the expectations they have of them[130]." Thus, VNSAs work on developing non-kinetic strategies to legitimize their "physical violence" within their security community and relevant populations[131]. Shared narratives and experiences are what shape the idealized patterns of behaviors for a state or non-state actors, and thus constitute crucial elements of their strategic culture. Historical and ideational narratives are the instruments that violent non-state actors utilize in their development and transformation processes, as seen in many case studies including al-Qaeda and global Jihadist movement[132]. In sum, narratives are themselves strategic elements and their influence is evident on both: the normative realm and the operational and tactical actions[133].

Leadership is the structure that institutionalizes the narrative and defines the power relations and the decision-making mechanisms within the security community. Many of the violent non-state actors have a well-defined leadership structure, let alone the development of a local governance model by many of these actors[134]. Identity, narrative, and leadership structure are basically the fundamental three pillars for a strategic culture analysis of a particular security community. Narrative, in particular, is the story that expresses the identity of the group, "who we are" and "who are them", and why and how a particular strategic tendency should be held. It is used by the leadership to express the driving strategic cultural codes of the group and/or to give meaning to and legitimize the group's actions within its strategic cultural context.

1.4.2 Visiting the Literature on Strategic Culture Analysis of Violent Non-State Actors

In the literature on strategic cultural analysis, a few works have been conducted on the strategic culture of violent non-state actors, however, these works are of great significance. These works were authored by a number of scholars of international relations, namely, James M. Smith, Jerry

[130] Castillo, "Cultural Irregular Warfare", 26.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Shultz, Strategic Culture and Strategic Studies, 11.
[133] Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2006), 22-23.
[134] Marta Furlan, "Understanding Governance by Insurgent Non-State Actors: A Multi-Dimensional Typology", *Civil Wars*, 22/4 (June 2020), 478-511.

Mark Long, Thomas H. Johnson, Mark Stout, Juan Castillo, Richard H. Shultz, Garrett Pierman, and Edward David Last.

Pierman and Stout focused on the very issue of whether al-Qaeda is capable of having strategic thought or not. While Pierman focused on history, identity, and narrative as key requirements for strategic culture; Stout dwelled on the sources of strategic culture, mainly the intellectual works of jihadist strategists, as a key indicator of al-Qaeda's capability of having strategic thought. Shultz, who also developed a framework of strategic culture analysis based on historical and ideational elements, particularly in the case of al-Qaeda, highlighted the role of technology in the organization's process of adaptation to the changing environment.

Smith and Long used strategic culture to examine the potential of VNSAs to use weapons of mass destruction (WMD). While Smith focused on developing a framework of strategic culture analysis to be applied to VNSAs, with particular focus on adjusting this framework to conduct a strategic analysis on the potential use of the WMD by VNSAs, Long applied the strategic culture analysis on al-Qaeda and how its strategic culture shaped the group's strategic preferences regarding the use of WMD.

Johnston applied the strategic culture analysis to the Taliban organization in Afghanistan, examining in detail the discourse used by the Taliban in the Shabnamah, the night letters as a method of communication used by the group to instruct or intimidate the populations. While Castillo had also studied the Taliban's non-kinetic strategies from a strategic culture perspective, Johnston's work is more in-depth as it examined original texts widely used by the group. Edward Last, in contrast, was the only scholar to conduct a comprehensive comparative study on strategic culture and violent non-state actors. He compared al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb studying their narrative, practices and sources of strategic culture. This subsection provides a general insight into the relatively new literature on strategic culture and violent non-state actors.

Garrett Pierman, a scholar of international relations, challenged the realist assumption that only state actors possess strategy arguing that non-state actors are subjectable to strategic analysis, both on strategic culture and grand strategy levels. Instead of focusing on territoriality, he focused on

key characteristics that revolve around a history, identity, and narrative to define whether a particular actor can be subjected to strategic analysis[135]. He concluded that al-Qaeda has strategic culture and grand strategy and this shall has implications for policy and academia in reconsidering the assumption that only actors with territories have strategic culture and grand strategy, particularly with the changing dynamics of global affairs where physical borders matter less[136].

Mark Stout argued that al-Qaeda and its franchises do have strategic thought, emphasizing the significance of studying the intellectual content of jihadists. He dwelled on the works of major ideologues who influenced its current strategic thought and elaborated on their particular understanding of Sunni Islam, the so-called "Salafi Jihadism"[137]. Stout explained how major Jihadist strategists have influence over the actions of jihadist organizations including the idea of 'global resistance' that involves military manuals, guides, and courses to encourage the masses to conduct popular struggle introduced by Abu Musab al-Suri. He, finally, emphasized the necessity of further research on the documents captured from jihadists as well as the ones already available to achieve 'analytic synergy.' Yet, such an analysis framework, according to Stout, should not be merely based on a traditional bottom-up approach to terrorism studies but also an up-bottom approach to strategic studies[138].

Richard H. Shultz, a scholar of international relations, developed a new framework to analyze and understand al-Qaeda from a strategic cultural perspective. First, he used strategic culture and strategic studies to examine and provide an understanding of al-Qaeda and the global Jihadist movement, specifically their vision, strategy, and operational principles. He highlighted the role of information technologies and globalization platforms in the organizational evolution of al-Qaeda. Second, he dwelled on a range of "core subjects of jihadi strategic studies," relevant debates, and their implications in terms of security and counterterrorism strategies[139]. He argues that al-Qaeda's resilient warfighting stems from its solid ideational and historical foundations, the organization is

[135] Pierman, "The Grand Strategy of Nonstate Actors: Theory and Implications", 73.
[136] Pierman, 77.
[137] Stout, "In Search of Salafi Jihadist Strategic Thought: Mining the Words of the Terrorists", 876.
[138] Stout, 886 and 888.
[139] Shultz, *Strategic Culture and Strategic Studies: An Alternative Framework for Assessing al-Qaeda and the Global Jihad Movement*, 3-4.

capable of adapting and transforming to changing strategic environments, and it utilized globalization and information technology to enhance its resilience and adaptation[140].

James M. Smith, a professor of military strategic studies, attempted to extend the application of strategic culture into the non-state actors field by introducing concepts and templates of analysis. His main focuses were: (1) the decisions and actions of violent non-state actors with respect to acquiring and using WMD, (2) the dynamics of conducting "asymmetrical operations"[141]. He argued that core elements of strategic culture, these are, identity, ideology, strategy, structure, and doctrine have a major influence in defining the strategic choice of a particular VNSA concerning acquiring and using WMD. Identity and ideology may or may not legitimize the use of the WMD, strategy determines the group's perception of the utility of the weapons depending on the group's objective, structure indicates the capacity of the group to acquire and use such weapons, and the doctrine defines the group's optimal vision regarding the operational use of the WMD including the targets[142].

Jerry Mark Long, a scholar of Middle East studies, applied the strategic culture framework on al-Qaeda addressing the issue of its potential acquisition and use of weapons of mass destruction. The main question he attempted to ask was "What is the likelihood al-Qaida will employ WMD?" He examined al-Qaeda's ideology as a narrative to determine "whether and under what circumstances al-Qaida and its affiliates may use" such weapons[143]. By dwelling on the key doctrine sources including medieval and modern thinkers such as Ibn Taymiyya, Wahhabism, Maududi, Qutb, Abdullah Azzam, Abu Bakr Naji, and Abu Musab al-Suri, and the key historical events such as Sykes-Picot, Establishment of Israel, The June War, The Ramadan/Yom Kippur War, and the Gulf War, Long attempted to explain the of al-Qaeda's strategic culture and how it is relevant in the group's potential use of WMD. He argued that the use of weapons that are perceived to cause mass slaughter is unlikely for religious and pragmatic reasons. In contrast, he argued that limited use of

[140] Shultz, 57.
[141] Smith, "Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors", 2.
[142] Smith, "Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors", 17.
[143] Long, "Strategic Culture, Al-Qaida, and Weapons of Mass Destruction",Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors: Weapons of Mass Destruction and Asymmetrical Operations Concepts and Cases (Colorado: USAF Institute for National Security Studies USAF Academy, 2008), 16-17.

WMD outside Muslim countries - if acquired - is likely, however, it is less likely for such weapons to be used in Muslim countries[144].

Juan Castillo, examined -through the lens of strategic culture- the use of non-kinetic strategies by violent non-state actors to "erode the normative power" of the state in the eyes of the relevant civil populations. He also applied his theoretical framework of strategic culture and non-kinetic strategies to the Taliban insurgency[145]. Castillo argued that non-kinetic strategies provide legitimacy to the physical violence and serve VNSAs seeking to replace the state through persuasive tactics that enable a certain VNSA to gain social support, and coercive tactics that prompt civilian population to cease to believe in the central authority. Studying non-kinetic strategies of VNSAs, in this sense, is crucial to develop effective tools to proactively counter VNSAs' efforts to reach out to civilian populations[146].

Thomas H. Johnson, a professor of national security affairs, applied the strategic culture analysis on the Afghanistan-based Taliban organization to explore "one dimension of the Taliban 'culture' or worldview and its implications for the insurgency" therein. He examined the Taliban's narrative portrayed in the *Shabnamah,* the night letters, which are used by religious figures, rebels, and jihadists to encourage collective opposition to authority or certain regulations and used particularly by the Taliban as a communication "method of instruction and intimidation" for similar purposes[147]. He concluded that the U.S. cultural intelligence had not been adequately effective in comparison to the Taliban's communication campaigns that effectively involved local, provincial, and national themes to appeal to the indigenous audiences with powerful and relevant messages. In Johnson's words: "Some of the U.S narratives have been downright silly and an embarrassment[148]."

[144] Long, 28-45.
[145] Castillo, "Cultural Irregular Warfare : The Crossroads between Strategic Culture and Non-Kinetic Strategies employed by Non-State Actors", 19.
[146] Castillo, 26.
[147] Thomas H. Johnson, "The Taliban insurgency and its tribal dynamics: an analysis of Shabnamah (Night Letters)", Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors: Weapons of Mass Destruction and Asymmetrical Operations Concepts and Cases (Colorado: USAF Institute for National Security Studies USAF Academy, 2008), 46-58.
[148] Johnson, 83.

Edward Last studied al-Qaeda and "al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb-AQIM" through the lens of strategic culture. His work is a comparative study of the two groups to: (1) identify the strategic narrative and strategic practices of both of them, (2) explore the nature of the relationship between narratives and practices, (3) examine to what extent do al-Qaeda franchises share a common strategic culture with al-Qaeda and the dynamics of similarities and differences among them, (4) identify the ideational basis for Jihadist political violence, the Islamist political thought as a source of these ideas, and the reflections of these ideas on strategic practices[149]. Last concluded that the two organizations have two distinct strategic cultures - despite some commonalities. These differences are mainly evident in the strategic focus of the two organizations. While al-Qaeda's strategy is focused on the battle against the far enemy, the West, AQIM is focused on the battle against the near enemies, national regimes[150].

1.4.3 Strategic Culture Change and Violent Non-State Actors

Violent non-state actors are more likely to undergo change in comparison to states for two main reasons: (1) the weak chains of command including the lack of hierarchical and bureaucratic structures and formal decision-making mechanisms, (2) factionalism and secessions[151]. Perhaps, the lack of internal mechanisms to balance subcultures and different strategic tendencies often results in splintering which makes continuity in strategic culture less likely.

Processes of change can vary in their nature, i.e. towards radicalization or de-radicalization. Structural conditions, including internal and external ones, trigger a process of change that produces different behaviors, which will respond to and interact with these conditions furthering the change process. Yet, structural conditions do not always result in change. A particular group may not respond to structural conditions through adaptation and change, but rather choose to resist and challenge these conditions and thus "give preference to "continuity-under-pressure over change." The change or continuity in the ideology and/or behavior of a particular actor is dependent

[149] Edward David Last, Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors: A Comparative Strategic Cultural Analysis of Al-Qaida and Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (Southampton, University of Southampton, School of Social Sciences, PhD Thesis, 2018), 10.
[150] Last, 306.
[151] Last, Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors: A Comparative Strategic Cultural Analysis of Al-Qaida and Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, 304.

on the nature of structural conditions and the type of response of the actor itself[152]. Structural conditions and the response of the actor, in a strategic culture sense, account for the aforementioned strategic environment and leadership, respectively.

The strategic culture of violent non-state actors in general and Jihadist ones in particular is a combination of external and local elements, which make them different from each other as they "adapt the broader ideology or Salafi-Jihadist milieu into their own national and regional contexts[153]." This makes it crucial to recognize that Jihadist groups, particularly al-Qaeda and its affiliates, are not homogeneous organizations[154]. But rather, they are of different characteristics according to the internal dynamics (the local context and leadership) and the strategic environment (external shock and/or pressure). The interaction between internal and external factors is what produces change and thus different patterns of jihadist VNSAs.

The U.S. 2022 national security strategy identified the current Jihadist groups as "more ideologically diverse and geographically diffuse than that of two decades ago. Al-Qaeda, Islamic State(ISIS), and associated forces have expanded from Afghanistan and the Middle East into Africa and Southeast Asia[155]." Strategic culture allows us to examine this diversity, both in terms of normative domains such as ideology, beliefs, culture, etc., and in terms of operational strategies and strategic behaviors, as well as track normative and operational changes in light of the internal and external dynamics.

[152] Omar Ashour, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming armed Islamist Movements* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2009), 12-13.
[153] Last, *Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors*, 305-306.
[154] Last, *Strategic Culture and Violent Non-State Actors*, 305-306.
[155] The White House, "National Security Strategy", https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/10/12/fact-sheet-the-biden-harris-administrations-national-security-strategy/ (Access 01 June 2023).

CHAPTER TWO

2 Al-NUSRA FRONT: ANALYSIS OF STRATEGIC CULTURE

2.1 Introduction

Secular Arab nationalism had been the major ideological source of Syria's strategic culture since the establishment of the Syrian Arab Republic in 1945. Thus, Islamist doctrines had too little influence over the strategic calculations of the country[156]. The formation of the Fighting Vanguard by Marwan Hadid in the early 1960s marked the first penetration of violent militant Islamism to Syria. Hadid, who was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood inspired by the Egyptian Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb, formed the Vanguard as an armed group with a blurred relationship to the Muslim Brotherhood. He sought to overthrow the regime through military action. However, the Vanguard - along with the whole movement of the Muslim Brotherhood regardless of who took part in violence or not - was crushed very brutally by the regime between 1979 and 1982[157].

This traumatic experience affirmed the idea held by many Islamists in Syria that "political Islam" is not suitable for confronting the regime. Many of them distanced themselves from the Muslim Brotherhood and went to Afghanistan to acquire the military experience needed to confront the regime[158]. The significance of the 1979-1982 era relies on the fact that it introduced violent Islamism to Syria and paved the way for the Jihadist movement to recruit fighters from Syria, many of these fighters returned to Syria after the 2011 uprising and took part in the military struggle. For instance, Abu Firas al-Suri, who was a Vanguard member between 1977 and 1980 and fought in

[156] Murhaf Jouejati, "The Making of Syria's Strategic Culture", *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Culturally Based Insights into Comparative National Security Policymaking*, eds. Jeannie L. Johnson, Kerry M. Kartchner, Jeffrey A. Larsen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 160.
[157] Dara Conduit, *A Brief History of Syria and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 34-35.
[158] Sterling Jensen, Waleed Al-Rawi, "Syria's Salafi Networks: More Local Than You Think", *PRISM - the Journal of Complex Operations*, 4/1 (2014), 45.

Afghanistan in the 1980s, returned to Syria and became a prominent leader and the spokesperson of al-Nusra Front until he died in 2016[159]. The Vanguard era resulted also in the emergence of Abu Musab al-Suri (Mustafa Sethmarian Nasar), who was a Vanguard member in Syria and later left to Afghanistan, as a prominent Jihadist strategist and ideologue for Jihadist groups worldwide[160].

Apart from that, the regime also utilized Jihadists against the U.S-led Coalition forces in Iraq after 2003, which played a vital role in the evolvement of al-Qaeda's branch therein[161]. Despite the secular nature of the Syrian state, the regime promoted the Jihadist discourse to help recruit fighters and send them to Iraq to fight against the U.S.-led coalition. In March 2003, the Grand Mufti of Syria, Ahmed Kuftaro, called on Muslims to participate in the Iraqi Jihad and "use all the possible means to defeat the aggression, including martyrdom operations [suicide bombings], against American and British Zionist warrior invaders[162]." In sum, the regime turned Syria into a safe hub for both recruiting and transferring Jihadist fighters to Iraq as part of the regime's strategy to carry out an indirect war against the U.S. presence in Iraq.

After 2011, as a result of the decline of state authority after the militarization of the Syrian uprising due to the excessive use of violence by the Assad regime[163], Islamist/Jihadist armed groups - along with other ideologically distinctive groups - started to take part in the conflict. While many groups have declined or lost their territorial control throughout the conflict such as Ahrar al-Sham, al-Nusra managed to survive and consolidate its presence in the security scene of the Syrian conflict. Al-Nusra was founded on 23 January 2012 under the leadership of Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani - a Jihadist veteran who was part of the war in Iraq. Al-Jawlani, who arrived in Syria from Iraq with a group of seven fighters (known as the Khorasan group), worked on remobilizing former Jihadist fighters released by the Assad regime in May-June 2011 under the stipulations of the decree 61 of

[159] "U.S. Behind Strike That Killed Nusra Front's Abu Firas: Officials", *Reuters*, 4 April 2016 (Access: 3 February 2014).
[160] Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri* (London: Hurst & Company, 2007), 30.
[161] Jensen and Al-Rawi, "Syria's Salafi Networks: More Local Than You Think", 46.
[162] Razan Zayroune, "al-Islamiyyūn al-Sūriyyūn wa Ghuwayat al-Jihād fi al-ʿIrāq" [Syrian Islamists and the Allure of Jihad in Iraq], *The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria: Sectarian Resistance and the Violence of the Movement* (Dubai: Al-Mesbar Studies & Research Center: 2011), 388.
[163] Isabel Bramsen, "From Civil Resistance to Civil War: Nonstrategic Mechanisms of Militarization in the Syrian Uprising", *Peace Change*, 45/2 (April 2020), 256-286.

31 May 2011. Former Jihadist fighters, notably the ones who were part of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's group in Iraq, constituted the backbone of al-Nusra in its initial establishment phase[164].

Al-Nusra had worked with and received financial and logistical assistance from the initial founding group of the ISIS between 2011 and 2013. However, al-Jawlani rejected the merger of al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq to form the ISIS which was unilaterally announced by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the ISIS. Instead, al-Jawlani pledged allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the head of al-Qaeda, in which al-Zawahiri declared al-Nusra as the al-Qaeda's branch in Syria and the ISIS as the al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq. Nevertheless, al-Baghdadi's decision to ignore that decision and deploy fighters in Syria resulted in wide-scale combat between ISIS and al-Nusra in Syria by 2014[165].

Due to its links with al-Qaeda and recruitment of foreign fighters, al-Nusra has been designated a terrorist organization globally and subjected to different sanction regimes. In December 2012, the U.S. State Department added al-Nusra Front to the Foreign Terrorist Organizations list[166]. In May 2013, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the jihadist veteran who would turn into a warlord, has also been designated by the State Department to the Global Terrorists list. The UN. Security Council included al-Nusra in the al-Qaeda sanctions list in 2014[167]. Türkiye listed al-Nusra as a terrorist group in 2014 as well[168].

Nevertheless, al-Nusra Front (currently Hayat Tahrir al-Sham-HTS) has not only survived the changing dynamics but also worked on building institutional capacity and integrating itself into the local setting. This evolvement of HTS has challenged the accepted assumptions of Jihadism as HTS "functions more like a government than a non-state actor, and the HTS leader Abu

[164] Mohamed-Ali Adraoui, "The Case of Jabhat Al-Nusra in the Syrian Conflict 2011–2016: Towards a Strategy of Nationalization?", *Mediterranean Politics* 24/ 2 (September 2017), 261.
[165] "Containing Transnational Jihadists in Syria's North West", International Crisis Group, 7 March 2023 (Access: 4 February 2024).
[166] Michael R. Gordon and Anne Barnard, "U.S. Places Militant Syrian Rebel Group on List of Terrorist Organizations", *The New York Times*, 10 December 2012 (Access: 4 February 2024).
[167] "Resolution 2170 Threats to International Peace and Security Caused by Terrorist Acts", United Nations Security Council, 15 August 2014 (Access: 9 February 2024).
[168] "Turkey Adds Al Nusra Front to List of Terror Organizations", *Anadolu Agency*, 3 June 2014 (Access: 6 February 2024).

Muhammad al-Jawlani is seeking the group's removal from the U.S. State Department's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations[169]."

This renders studying the early phase of the group's evolution crucial to understanding its Jihadist baggage and its implications for its present and future. This chapter examines the evolvement of the group between 2011 and 2016 through the lens of strategic culture by delving into the group's narrative and strategies revealing key strategic cultural characteristics of al-Nusra, as a violent non-state actor capable of developing strategic thought. It provides a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the group, its narrative as a manifestation of its worldview in rhetoric, the strategies as mechanisms for survival and adaptation, and the interconnection between the narrative and strategies as two pillars of its strategic culture.

2.2 Strategic Narrative

The strategic narrative of al-Nusra Front was driven from al-Qaeda's narrative in which it incorporates near enemy and far enemy categorization of the Jihadist organizations, and thus falls in total contradiction with the national revolutionary narrative of the Syrian uprising. Nevertheless, the strategic environment of the conflict enabled the group to use its narrative to get integrated into the conflict dynamics, i.e. exploiting the local grievances stemming from the brutal policies of the Assad regime and maintaining a domestic focus on the near enemy to meet the expectations of the local grievances. This narrative analysis examines the group's tale of the conflict, composed of the plot, the main characters of the plot, and the group's self-perception. It also digs into the key themes that reflect the group's worldview, drive, and/or provide legitimacy to its practices, and thus constitute founding elements of its strategic culture.

[169] Aaron Y. Zelin, *The Age of Political Jihadism: A Study of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield 2023).

2.2.1 Characters and Plot

As Abu Muhammed al-Jawlani declared in December 2012, the reason and the objective of the formation of "al-Nusra Front for the People of the Levant" group was to "reinstate God's authority to his earth and avenge the violated honor and spilled blood[170]." In his declaration, two types of enemies were precisely defined: the "Western enemy[171]" and the "Baathist enemy[172]," which is a concrete manifestation of the "far enemy" and "near enemy" categorization of Jihadist organizations.

He defined the Levant as a place of a "new old historical conflict[173]". The deep roots of this conflict are perceived to go back to the times of the prophet Muhammad, while the modern roots of the conflict are connected to the broader Islamist movements in Egypt, the 1980s era in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq[174]. Al-Jawlani suggests a type of historical continuity in respect to the conflict in the Middle East, or the Levant. He dates the conflict back to three thousand years ago, to the times of the Roman and Persian empires. He categorizes three major historical enemies: "the Jews", "the Crusader forces", and the "Safavid forces." Muslims, in this narrative, are historical enemies of the three because the rise of Islam was the reason for the decline of these great empires, and the expulsion of Jews from the Arabian Peninsula. While Muslims of that era are currently the "Sunnis", the Crusaders are the "international powers," and the Safavid are the "Shia sect." Al-Jawlani promotes a theory of war wherein all parties are conspiring against Muslims[175].

In this sense, Western countries, Israel, and Iran represent the far enemies in al-Nusra's logic, which are also coded as the Crusaders, the Jews/Zionists, and Persian/Safavid/Rafida/Shia respectively. He also recognizes and emphasizes the sectarian aspect of the conflict within the context of his broader theory of war. The main characters of this conflict are the Sunnis and the Alawites. Sunnis,

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[170] "Al-Iʿlān ʿan Jabhat al-Nuṣrah" [Announcement of al-Nusra Front], *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya*, 23 January 2012 (Access: 1 May 2024).
[171] *ibid*.
[172] *ibid*.
[173] "Liqa' al-Yawm | Qa'id Jabhat al-Nusra: Lan naqbal bi ayy masar siyasi yuḥi nizam Bashar 'ala hisab alam al-sha'b wa tadhihatih" [Today's Meeting | Leader of al-Nusra Front: We will not accept any political path that revives the Bashar regime at the expense of the suffering and sacrifices of the people], *YouTube/Aljazeera Arabic*, 19 December 2013 (Access: 1 May 2024).
[174] *ibid*. See Appendix (A1.1.)
[175] *ibid.* See Appendix (A1.2.)

in this story, are the victims of the Alawite rule which is supported by the "Israel and the international system." The Assad regime represents the most prominent near enemy, coded as the "Nusayri regime" in al-Nusra's narrative[176].

Muslim-majority states in the Middle East are viewed as "corrupt, oppressive, and immoral" regimes created by the Western states to serve their interests in the post-colonization era. These states are also perceived as partners of the far enemies in "deceiving the Sunnis - encircling and restraining them[177]." This is how al-Jawlani expresses this perception:

> "Starting with the Crusades, then the era of colonization at the beginning of the last century, followed by the planting of the Jews in the region after the Balfour Declaration… and the establishment of corrupt, oppressive, and immoral regimes that have played their part in serving Western agendas[178]."

Despite that, from the outset, al-Jawlani underlined a localized interpretation of Jihadism in shaping al-Nusra's identity, expressing that the group's founders are the "Mujahidi al-Sham" [Jihadists of the Levant][179]. The emphasis on the Levant concept comes in line with the group's strategy to fight the near enemy and not carry attacks out of the Syrian territories. Although al-Nusra was al-Qaeda's branch in Syria and held proximity to the broader Jihadist movement worldwide, it demonstrated a distinction from al-Qaeda in terms of the geographical scope of its actions and the adversaries identified. In particular, al-Nusra explicitly identified the regime in Syria and its allies as its primary targets rather than the Western states, i.e. the near enemy and not the far enemy in the Jihadist logic[180].

Al-Nusra perceived itself as the preeminent religious authority of the Muslim "Umma" in Syria, positioning itself as the vanguard entrusted with the legitimate right to endorse or disapprove the future rulers of Syria, contingent upon their adherence to the Sharia law. As such, the group promotes itself as the true representatives of the Muslim population and the enforcers and vigilant

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[176] *ibid.* See Appendix (A1.3.)
[177] *ibid.*
[178] "Wa Qabilu al-Ayyam Khayrun Min Madiha" [And the days to come are better than their past], *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya*, July 2013 (Access: 6 May 2024).
[179] "Al-Iʿlān ʿan Jabhat al-Nuṣrah" [Announcement of al-Nusra Front], *ibid.*
[180] "Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Istratijiyya Nash'at Jaysh al-Fath wa Muhimmat Jabhat al-Nusra fi Suriya (1)" [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. The Strategy of the Emergence of the Army of Conquest and the Mission of al-Nusra in Syria (1)], *YouTube\Aljazeera Arabic*, 33:00-35:00, 27 May 2015 (Access: 1 June 2024). See Appendix (A1.4.)

guardians of the Sharia law in Syria[181]. Al-Nusra also perceived itself as an extension of the global Jihadist movement, yet a learning actor that demonstrates the ability to extract lessons from history and experience and adapt its strategy and tactics, while preserving its core fundamental beliefs[182].

In sum, al-Nusra envisioned a plot where all the characters, the Western states, the Muslim-majority states, Israel, and the Assad regime and its allies- aligned against the Sunni Muslims in Syria. Al-Nusra suggested that the conflict in Syria was part of a historically ongoing war against Islam and the Islamic "Umma" that dates back to the times of the Roman and the Persian empires, the early era of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, the battles of the Crusaders, the colonization era, and the Jihadist movement in the 20th century. Al-Nusra, in this plot, was a local Jihadist group that undertakes the mission of defending the Sunni Muslims in the Levant against Assad and its allies and seeking to enforce Sharia within Syria. In other words, al-Nusra maintained the assumptions of the "far enemy" and the "near enemy" in its plot, however, opted for a strategic focus on the near enemy. In the following sub-sections, the key themes of the group's narrative will be examined by analyzing the speeches of al-Jawlani, the leader of the group.

2.2.2 Sharia and Islamic Emirate

Al-Nusra's primary objective encompassed the establishment of an Islamic state, the implementation of Sharia law within Syria, and the broader aspiration to induce societal transformation by fostering the Islamization of the populace and propagating the Jihadist ideology. This is how al-Jawlani expressed his group's objective:

> "What matters to us is the rule of Sharia, the establishment of justice, the removal of oppression from people, and the formation of a righteous Islamic government based on the prophetic path… History will record the post-jihad era in the Sham and the pre-jihad era in the Levant. This history will document a new birth for this [Syrian] society that is entirely different from the previous one[183]."

[181] "Liqa' al-Yawm | Qa'id Jabhat al-Nusra: Lan naqbal bi ayy masar siyasi yuḥi nizam Bashar 'ala hisab alam al-sha'b wa tadhihatih" [Today's Meeting | Leader of al-Nusra Front: We will not accept any political path that revives the Bashar regime at the expense of the suffering and sacrifices of the people], *ibid.* See Appendix (A1.5.)
[182] *ibid.* See Appendix (A1.6.)
[183] *ibid.*

Sharia, in al-Jawlani's mindset, is a universal divine guideline applicable to all humans, and an alternative to all legal frameworks and worldviews that al-Jawlani deemed inherently limited and flawed. He perceived Sharia as the means to liberate "every human being on the face of the earth from the restrictions imposed upon them and the laws devised by humans to make people worship their desires and limited theories[184]." Sharia is perceived, in the jihadist sense, as the optimal divine system, offering a superior alternative to democratic systems considered to be incompatible with the divine will and human nature. Al-Jawlani stated, "the parliamentary governance systems permit and prohibit as they see fit, based on the desires and inclinations that contradict Sharia, let alone that it is abnormal and repugnant by nature[185]."

The establishment of the "Islamic Emirate" stood as the ultimate objective of the group, signifying the group's dedication to the Sharia principles and its determination to enforce them without pursuing external validation from third parties. Al-Jawlani portrays the group and his own decisions as independent and motivated only by their normative codes[186]. The so-called "Islamic Emirate" is portrayed as the defensive entity against the defined enemies of the groups in Syria, including "the regime, the Ghulat [extremists], the troublemakers, the PKK, and all the enemies who seek to harm the Umma[187]."

Al-Jawlani defined the ISIS, often coded as Ghulat [extremists] or the Kharijites, as enemies along with the regime. One can argue that the Emirate concept, in this narrative, served as the alternative entity to the "Caliphate" announced by the ISIS at that time. It seemed to be a countering mechanism to compete with the ISIS over dominating the Jihadist sphere in Syria. Al-Jawlani utilized the Ghulat and the emirate concepts to delegitimize ISIS within the Jihadist context and claim to be the true Jihadists seeking to establish an Islamically legitimate state[188].

Furthermore, the idea of the Emirate is perceived and propagated as a continuity to and interconnected with the Islamist and Jihadist movements, particularly al-Qaeda and its Jihadist trajectory in Afghanistan, and the anti-Israeli movement in Palestine. The emphasis on al-Qaeda and Afghanistan, as well as Palestine is also in line with al-Jawlani's position to claim legitimacy

[184] "Wa Qabilu al-Ayyam Khayrun Min Madiha" [And the days to come are better than their past], *ibid.*
[185] *Ibid.*
[186] "Al-Imara [The Emirate]", *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya*, July 2014 (Access: 1 June 2024), See Appendix (A2.1.)
[187] *ibid.*
[188] *ibid.* See Appendix (A2.2.)

within the Jihadist and Islamist spheres against the rise of ISIS, as al-Qaeda's trajectory of Afghanistan marks the original and initial Jihadist efforts worldwide and Palestine represents a symbolic significance for the whole Islamist paradigm, let alone Muslim populations in general[189].

2.2.3 Historical Victimhood and Conspiracy

It can be observed that victimhood is an essential element of al-Nusra's narrative. A historical victimhood hinged on the old and modern historical turning points. In this narrative, Sunni Muslims are presented as the victims of all these events, and all the involved parties are perceived to have conspired or at least had a mutual interest in fighting against Muslims at all times. Al-Nusra used old historical events such as the crusades of the medieval period and modern historical events such as the colonization of Muslim majority countries, the establishment of Israel, the emergence of the Arab nation-states that are portrayed as Western-made, and the Islamic revolution in Iran. All of these historical events are used to narrate the perception of historical victimhood that continues until this moment[190].

Old historical events are of great significance in shaping the victimhood narrative, especially against the group's identified enemies in Syria including Iran. The Sunni identity and Sunni Muslims, within this victimhood narrative, have been historically targeted by Iran due to the Persian imperial ambitions rooted in the early history of the Islamic Caliphate and the emergence of the Arab Umayyad state that marked the rise of the sectarian division between Sunni and Shia sects. The group employed this historical victimhood to interpret the growing Iranian, cultural, and economic influence in Syria by linking it to the rising influence of Abbasids within the Umayyad Empire, which eventually led to the establishment of a new rule that was inclusive of Persians. Shi'ism is considered instrumental for Iran to expand its influence in Syria in which the real motivation is not religious but rather Persian imperial. Such a narrative serves more efficiently in further delegitimizing Iran in al-Nusra's narrative. It is important to note that the anti-Iran

[189] *ibid.* See Appendix (A2.3.)
[190] "Wa Qabilu al-Ayyam Khayrun Min Madiha", [And the days to come are better than their past], *ibid.* See Appendix (A3.1.)

sentiment is not peculiar to al-Nusra, it has resonated among rebel groups across the ideological spectrum due to Iran's military involvement in backing the Assad regime in Syria[191].

The Russian intervention in Syria was also interpreted through historical victimhood by referencing certain old historical grievances, particularly the Crusades. By identifying the Russian intervention as an "Eastern Crusade", portraying the Shia and Nusayri sects as co-conspirators with Russia, and linking them with an Abbasid vizier Ibn al-Alqami who was blamed for collaborating with the Mongol Empire overthrowing the Abbasid Caliphate in 1258[192]; the group employed the historical victimhood in interpreting the trajectory of the conflict[193].

Modern historical events were also used in constructing the victimhood narrative, particularly the era of colonization. The colonizing powers were deemed as founders, or at least supporters, of the authoritarian regimes in Arab and Muslim-majority countries. In this narrative, the Assad regime claimed and consolidated power in Syria with France's assistance. Al-Jawlani stated: "Hafez al-Assad came to power with the French sponsorship[194]." It can be said that historical victimhood served as the group's lens in perceiving the conflict in Syria, wherein Sunnis were deemed to be victims of all parties, including the international community, implying a sense of conspiracy.

> "The conflict has become clear, a struggle between right and wrong, a treacherous international community that offers roses to the Sunnis from the front while stabbing them in the back, the ferocity of a Safavid [Iran-backed Shia militias] determined to kill Sunni children before their men, and between lurking Jews exploiting the current atmosphere to expand their settlements[195]."

[191] "Bila Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Mawqif Jabhat al-Nusra min al-Rabiʿ al-ʿArabi wa Ra'ayhim fi al-Ikhwan wa Tanzim al-Dawla (2)" [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. al-Nusra's Position on the Arab Spring and Their Opinion on the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State (2)], *YoutTube/Aljazeera Arabic*, 2:25-16:30, 3 June 2015 (Access: 2 May 2024). See Appendix (A3.2.)

[192] The story of Ibn al-Alqami is popularly used in the Sunni-Shi polarization. See: Nassima Neggaz, *The Falls of Baghdad in 1258 and 2003: A Study in Sunni-Shi'i Clashing Memories,* PhD Dissertation, Georgetown University-Graduate School of Arts & Sciences, January 2013.

[193] "Al-Tadakhul al-Rusi, al-Sahm al-Akhir" [The Russian Intervention, the Last Arrow], *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya*, 18 February 2016 (Access: 2 May 2024). See Appendix (A3.3.)

[194] "Bila Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Mawqif Jabhat al-Nusra min al-Rabiʿ al-ʿArabi wa Ra'ayhim fi al-Ikhwan wa Tanzim al-Dawla (2)" [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. al-Nusra's Position on the Arab Spring and Their Opinion on the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State (2)], 7:00-8:00, *ibid.*

[195] "Liqa' al-Yawm | Qa'id al-Nusra: Lan naqbal bi ayy masar siyasi yuḥi nizam Bashar 'ala hisab alam al-sha'b wa tadhihatih" [Today's Meeting | Leader of al-Nusra Front: We will not accept any political path that revives the Bashar regime at the expense of the suffering and sacrifices of the people], *ibid.*

Al-Nusra often employed victimhood with a sense of conspiracy to interpret major atrocities such as the chemical attacks on Eastern Ghouta Syrian people suffered at the hands of the Assad regime which was portrayed to be secretly supported by the international community. A theory of victimhood hints that the Assad regime and the international community are co-conspirators against Sunnis in Syria[196]. This explains how al-Nusra exploited the grievance and anger among Syrians who were suffering the brutality of the regime while being and feeling left behind by the international community. The failure of the international community, particularly the U.S. under the Obama Administration, to enforce the "red lines" on the regime if it used chemical weapons was an illustrative example[197]- one of the mistakes that paved the way for Jihadists to rise.

This sense of conspiracy was not restricted to the conflict in Syria and the atrocities committed by the Assad regime. Rather, it was part of a broader conspiracy against Sunni Muslims everywhere in which the increasing influence of Iran, particularly in Iraq, was portrayed as part of a broader U.S. plan. "Iran did not take control of Iraq; it was America that handed Iraq to Iran. The matter is clear. America came and occupied Iraq; it was not Iran that occupied it. Then, they delivered it to Iran on a silver platter, and they trained an entire army of those who follow Iran[198]." This gives insight into how Jihadists in Syria narrated their conspiracy theory using an already evident anti-U.S. sentiment and relevant grievances, particularly the occupation of Iraq.

In Short, the Sunni identity was a central element in forming the victimhood narrative of al-Nusra. The sectarian violence of the Assad regime, including massacres such as the Houla massacre in Homs Governorate in August 2012[199], was used by the group to mobilize support, propagate its ideology, and Islamize the national uprising. In his 2012 audio release titled "General Mobilization", al-Jawlani said the following: "You have heard of the massacre committed by the regime in Houla, and you have witnessed, like everyone, the images of children and women being killed, even before the elders and men, in the manner of slaughter. What is the fault of these children

[196] "Al-ʿAyn bi-l-ʿAyn" [An Eye for an Eye], *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya*, 25 August 2013 (Access: 2 June 2024). See Appendix (A3.4.)
[197] Reassessing Obama's Biggest Mistake, *The Economist*, 22 August 2023 (Access: 2 June 2024).
[198] "Bila Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Mawqif Jabhat al-Nusra min al-Rabiʿ al-ʿArabi wa Ra'ayhim fi al-Ikhwan wa Tanzim al-Dawla (2)" [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. al-Nusra's Position on the Arab Spring and Their Opinion on the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State (2)], 13:00-14:00, *ibid.*
[199] "Houla Massacre: UN Blames Syria Troops and Militia", *BBC News*, 15 August 2013 (Access: 9 February 2024).

except that they are the sons of Sunni Islam[200]". The sectarian violence carried out by the regime[201] was a primary point of reference for al-Nusra to hijack the national movement and mobilize support for its extremist worldview and actions.

2.2.4 Politics and Political Solution

As enforcement of Sharia law was the primary objective and one of the key defining themes of al-Nusra's narrative. In this sense, the group's rejection of negotiations to reach a political solution, let alone their refusal of modern/secular political mechanisms such as elections, should not be seen as surprising. The group's objective to establish an Islamic Emirate as an al-Qaeda affiliate made their opposition to political processes ideologically binding, resorting to intangible religious ideals such as the Shura [consultation]. Al-Jawlani stated in this context the following "as Muslims, we do not believe in processes or political parties, nor in parliamentary elections. Instead, we believe in an Islamic rule system where Shura [consultation] prevails, and justice is upheld[202]."

The group considers negotiations with the regime to reach a political solution under international auspices as an attempt to rehabilitate the regime. Consequently, participants in the peace talks in Geneva under UN auspices are labeled with betrayal and treason, portrayed as "outsiders" who did not take part in the struggle against the regime, and demonized based on the grievances that local populations have suffered during the conflict[203].

The political solution to the Syrian conflict was perceived as a means to undermine the struggle of the "Sunni people" against the regime in Syria, embracing a victimhood narrative with a sense of conspiracy in which Western states were portrayed as conspirators that have hidden agendas behind their support for a political solution. Explaining his group's rejection of political solution, al-Jawlani said the following: "America's role, along with the Western coalition, is essentially to drug

[200] "Al-Nafir al-ʿAm" [The General Mobilization], *Jami' al-Kutub al- Islamiyya*, 1 June 2012 (Access: 5 January 2024).
[201] Samer Bakkour and Gareth Stansfield, "Sectarianism, Indiscriminate Violence and Displacement in the Syrian Regime's Civil War Strategy", *Conflict, Security & Development* (7 May 2024), 1-24.
[202] "Wa Qabilu al-Ayyam Khayrun Min Madiha" [And the days to come are better than their past], *ibid.*
[203] "Liqa' al-Yawm | Qa'id Jabhat al-Nusra: Lan naqbal bi ayy masar siyasi yuḥi nizam Bashar 'ala hisab alam al-sha'b wa tadhihatih" [Today's Meeting | Leader of al-Nusra Front: We will not accept any political path that revives the Bashar regime at the expense of the suffering and sacrifices of the people], *ibid.* See Appendix (A4.1.)

these people and the people of the Levant until they reach a consensus-based political solution. The political solution, of course, will be achieved at the expense of the blood of Sunni people[204]."

Nevertheless, one can argue that al-Nusra's despise and rejection of modern political procedures and mechanisms was not merely ideological. It was also based on a deterministic logic that considers political procedures to be ineffective and unrealistic as means for Islamists to attain and maintain power. This determinism was driven by the sense of conspiracy held by the group, assuming that it is inevitable for Islamists to fail in politics due to a Western rejection of Islamists no matter what concessions the latter shall make. The case of the Muslim Brotherhood and its failure to preserve power in Egypt was perceived by al-Nusra's leadership as concrete evidence that further underpins its narrative[205].

As an alternative to political means, the group embraced armed struggle in the name of Jihad as a holy war that was not only propagated as ideologically or religiously binding, but also as a realistic and effective means to enforce change and achieve political objectives. In this sense, political participation and peaceful mobilization were portrayed as ineffective. To sum up, the rejection of politics and a political solution and the endorsement of Jihad as a holy war in al-Nusra's narrative reflected its strategic cultural assumptions vis-à-vis war, that is, the inevitable nature and the zero-sum of war[206].

2.2.5 Masculinity

Masculinities have always been significant elements of the narrative used by VNSAs[207]. It is also one of the key themes adopted by al-Nusra in its narrative to recruit and mobilize fighters, as well

[204] "Bila Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Istratijiyya Nash'at Jaysh al-Fath wa Muhimmat Jabhat al-Nusra fi Suriya (1)" [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. The Strategy of the Emergence of the Army of Conquest and the Mission of al-Nusra in Syria (1)], 35:00-36:00, *ibid.*
[205] "Bila Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Mawqif Jabhat al-Nusra min al-Rabiʿ al-ʿArabi wa Ra'ayhim fi al-Ikhwan wa Tanzim al-Dawla (2)" [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. al-Nusra's Position on the Arab Spring and Their Opinion on the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State (2)], 29:00-33:00, *ibid.* See Appendix (A4.2.)
[206] *ibid*. 33:00-33:25. See Appendix (A4.3.)
[207] Aleksandra Dier and Gretchen Baldwin, "Masculinities and Violent Extremism", *International Peace Institute and UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED)*, June 2022 (Access: 2 June 2024).

as motivate recruits to fight and unite against the enemy under the group's umbrella. Various elements that can be considered associated with masculinity including bravery, resilience and defiance are employed to glorify extreme violence and bloodshed which were justified through a sense of us-them division that portrayed the group's war as "just and holy" against "oppressive and blasphemous" enemies[208].

Resilience and defiance, as masculine codes, were also employed to project a strong image against external pressures such as terrorism listing and potential consequences including military actions. Yet, the narrative embraced a defensive position rather than the offensive one employed against the regime. Speaking on the designation of al-Nusra as a terrorist group, al-Jawlani said the following: "We are undoubtedly honored to carry out this mission, we do not care about terrorism lists. The US and the West should be aware that any step taken to destroy the Islamic project in the region, whether politically, militarily, or in security-wise, will only further revive the Ummah[209]."

Manhood was another masculine notion used to project a strong, resilient, and intelligent leader image who acts according to a strategy and tactics and changes them when necessary, emphasizing fearlessness and risk-taking without getting deprived of reason by taking into account the enemy's power. An envisioned version of masculinity was used to justify changes to be taken, a potential ceasefire, and the later transformation process of the group. Such masculinity links collective interest and reason with bravery and resilience to preserve the strong image promoted[210].

The masculinity narrative that glorifies strength, toughness, and violence was not absolute in all contexts, it did not project violent masculinity as a lifestyle. Rather, violent masculinity was advocated against the enemy while "compassion" was promoted in daily life behavior, seeking to build a moral image of the group as it was working to integrate itself into the local setting. In sum, al-Nusra's leader used various types of masculinities in different contexts according to the utility of each masculinity in a certain context in mobilizing support for actions or justifying them[211].

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[208] "Houla Massacre: UN Blames Syria Troops and Militia", *BBC News*, 15 August 2013 (Access: 9 February 2024). See Appendix (A5.1.)
[208] "Al-Nafir al-ʿAm" [The General Mobilization], *ibid.*
[209] "Wa Qabilu al-Ayyam Khayrun Min Madiha" [And the days to come are better than their past], *ibid.*
[210] "Al-Tadakhul al-Rusi, al-Sahm al-Akhir" [The Russian Intervention, the Last Arrow], *ibid.* See Appendix (A5.2.)
[211] *ibid.* See Appendix (A5.3.)

2.2.6 Sacrifice

Extreme self-sacrifice among groups with intense collective experiences including terrorist organizations is an important subject of study[212]. Al-Nusra is not an exception. When announcing the formation of al-Nusra, its leader al-Jawlani devoted a great deal of significance to "sacrifice" theme, glorifying it as a holy mission and moral duty to defend ordinary people's lives and honor as well as defending religion. Sacrifice was promoted as a noble and heroic reaction to atrocities suffered by ordinary people, it contained both material sacrifice and life sacrifice that was often coded as martyrdom[213].

Besides, sacrifice was also promoted fanatically to project a strong image that was interconnected with the masculine traits the group embraced. By presenting death in combat as a desired holy objective rather than a tactic, it can be said that the fanatic version of sacrifice served as a survival and defense mechanism to maintain the strong image as well as the fighters' motivation in an asymmetric war. This is how al-Jawlani fanatically explained sacrifice:

> "The wars in the region have produced for you [the West] thousands of generations of resilient youth un-afraid of war. They grew up amidst the roar of planes, the clatter of armored vehicles, the rain of shells and tanks. Generations that embrace death, and their ultimate aspiration is to sacrifice their lives willingly in Jihad[214]."

The willingness to sacrifice was utilized to express sorrow and project an image of a sympathetic leader who values the lives of his fellow Jihadists as much as he values his own. When mourning a prominent Jihadist militant, al-Jawlani stated: "O Abu Khalid[215], I wish you mourned for me, and I didn't mourn for you. I wish I departed from this world, and you didn't. I wish you shed tears for me, and I didn't shed them[216]."

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[212] Harvey Whitehouse, "Dying for the Group: Towards a General Theory of Extreme Self-Sacrifice", *Behavioral and Brain Sciences,* 41 (February 2018).
[213] Al-Iʿlān ʿan Jabhat al-Nuṣrah" [Announcement of al-Nusra Front], *ibid.* See Appendix (A6.1.)
[214] "Li-Ahl al-Wafa' Yahūn al-ʿAṭā'" [For the People of Loyalty, Giving is Easy], *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya*, 28 September 2014 (Access: 5 January 2024).
[215] A Jihadist militant killed by the ISIS suicide attack.
[216] "Laytaka Rathaytani" [I Wish You Had Mourned Me], *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya*, 24 February 2014 (Access: 5 January 2024).

This sympathy was used in parallel with aspects of heroism and resilience. Sacrificers were portrayed as heroes who did not fear death because of their commitment to defending religion and that sacrificing their lives was a sign of their devotion and courage. Aiming at preserving the morale of fighters along with the strong image, sacrifice was portrayed as a passway to paradise in a conflict perceived as a divine struggle[217]. However, sacrifice was not adopted and glorified merely because of ideological motives, but also deemed realistically required to achieve the war objective, that is, defeating the enemies. For al-Jawlani, "the noble goal requires sacrifice. Without sacrifice, where do glory and victory come from? Thus, people must take action, and then God Almighty will grant them victory over their enemies[218]."

Moreover, sacrifice was perceived as a natural phenomenon of war throughout history, Islamic history in particular. Sacrifice was framed as a long-standing holy practice that has been employed since the first Islamic conquests and an action carried out to defend the Islamic legacy and defeat those who undermined this legacy. In al-Jawlani's words:

> "Remember that this land was watered with the purest of blood until it was conquered – the blood of the companions of the prophet of god, peace be upon him – and then inherited by one after another, until it fell hostage to the hands of covetous invaders, and then it came into the possession of the Nusayris[219]."

Lastly, sacrifice also served as a reason not to compromise the group's objective. It was promoted as a standard in which the group that makes greater sacrifice shall be the one that has a say in the post-conflict era[220].

[217] "Fi Ritha' al-Shaykh Abi Basir al-Wuhayshi" [In Mourning of the Sheikh Abu Basir al-Wuhayshi], *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya,* 23 June 2015 (Access: 5 January 2024). See Appendix (A6.2.)
[218] "Bila Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Mawqif Jabhat al-Nusra min al-Rabiʿ al-ʿArabi wa Ra'ayhim fi al-Ikhwan wa Tanzim al-Dawla (2)" [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. al-Nusra's Position on the Arab Spring and Their Opinion on the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State (2)], 25:00-25:20, *ibid.*
[219] "Al-Tadakhul al-Rusi, al-Sahm al-Akhir" [The Russian Intervention, the Last Arrow], *ibid.*
[220] "Ahl al-Sham Fadaynakum bi-Arwahina" [People of the Levent, We Have Sacrificed Our Souls for You], 28 December 2012 (Access: 5 January 2024). See Appendix (A6.3.)

2.2.7 Solidarity

The solidarity theme adopted by al-Nusra had three main aspects: a) solidarity with the foreign fighters (non-Syrian fighters), the so-called *Muhajireen,* b) regional Muslim solidarity, and c) solidarity and empathy with the Sunni Muslim communities. Solidarity with *Muhajireen* comes in line with the group's belief of embarrassing pure Islamist-Jihadist fundamentalism and rejecting national or local motivations for struggle. In this sense, al-Jawlani stated the following: "We do not much recognize the concept of nationality. We align ourselves with a Muslim party [al-Qaeda in this context] that defends Muslims[221]."

The notion of rejecting national aspects was an ideological element shared by Jihadist groups worldwide to increase the capacity of Jihadist recruitment. This dynamic became even more relevant in cases of rivalry among certain Jihadist groups competing to dominate the Jihadist sphere. In this context, solidarity with the *Muhajireen* was utilized by al-Nusra as a tactic to recruit and maintain foreign Jihadists in its ranks to counter the rise of ISIS which managed to attract many of the foreign ranked fighters from al-Nusra[222].

Muhajireen were glorified as heroes who chose not to be beside their families in their homeland to join the struggle sacrificing their money and lives for the sake of the "Islamist cause" al-Nusra was pursuing. The narrative suggested a collective responsibility to show compassion and provide protection to foreign fighters, emphasizing unity and portraying the group and its leader as compassionate to their recruits[223].

Regional Muslim solidarity suggested that Muslims, despite the established national settings and identities, still hold onto the Muslim identity as a primary one, which makes the events that occur within a specific national setting surpass the national borders and have an impact on a regional level. This narrative portrayed regional solidarity as a source of strength, grounding it in the material and human resources in the Middle East.

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[221] "Mu'tamar Sahafi" [Press Conference], *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya*, 12 December 2015 (Access: 5 January 2024).
[222] "Al-Liqa' al-Sawti al-Awwal ma'a al-Shaykh al-Fatih" [The First Audio Interview with Sheikh al-Fatih], *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya*, November 2014 (Access: 5 January 2024). See Appendix (A7.1.)
[223] "Wa Qabilu al-Ayyam Khayrun Min Madiha" [And the days to come are better than their past], *ibid.* See Appendix (A7.2.)

> "Muslims there, the Sunni people, have strong bonds. What happens in the Levant affects the Arabian Peninsula, affects Yemen, affects Egypt, affects Sudan, affects Somalia, affects Khorasan, affects Afghanistan, and Pakistan. This powerful Muslim Ummah possesses, and we possess, the largest human resources, the most important waterways, and the most significant subterranean wealth of minerals[224]."

Solidarity with local communities was also a significant aspect of al-Nusra's narrative. As it glorified *Mujahideen* as the heroes defending local Sunni communities, the vulnerability of locals who were suffering oppression by the regime and the absence of foreign intervention to protect them was portrayed as a reason why local communities would accept and embrace the group. This is how al-Jawlani explained it: "The popular incubator has no choice but to embrace the *Mujahideen* after the world's abandonment of them. They have witnessed with their own eyes that it was the *Mujahideen* who supported them and worked diligently to alleviate the oppression they suffered[225]."

This solidarity involved accepting the local social dynamics despite their indifference to the Jihadist ideology of al-Nusra. This solidarity narrative, centered around sympathy with locals, aimed at bridging the gap between the outsider group with the local community and avoiding enforcing radical measures that can spark anger or create resentment among them[226].

Building solidarity in the narrative correlated with the group's ambition for territorial control and governance. Recognizing the governance void as a result of the declining state authority, the group sought to fill the void of authority which in turn required establishing social networks with local communities. Solidarity was used to initiate the process of running services and building governance capacity[227].

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[224] "Bila Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Mawqif Jabhat al-Nusra min al-Rabiʿ al-ʿArabi wa Ra'ayhim fi al-Ikhwan wa Tanzim al-Dawla (2)" [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. al-Nusra's Position on the Arab Spring and Their Opinion on the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State (2)], 19:00-20:00, *ibid.*

[225] "Liqa' al-Yawm | Qa'id Jabhat al-Nusra: Lan naqbal bi ayy masar siyasi yuḥi nizam Bashar 'ala hisab alam al-sha'b wa tadhihatih" [Today's Meeting | Leader of al-Nusra Front: We will not accept any political path that revives the Bashar regime at the expense of the suffering and sacrifices of the people], *ibid.*

[226] "Li-Ahl al-Wafa' Yahūn al-ʿAṭā'" [For the People of Loyalty, Giving is Easy], *ibid.* See Appendix (A7.3.)

[227] "Ahl al-Sham Fadaynakum bi-Arwahina" [People of the Levent, We Have Sacrificed Our Souls for You], *ibid.* See Appendix (A7.4.)

2.2.8 Retribution and Reciprocity versus Morality

Retribution and reciprocity constituted a significant part of the narrative used by al-Nusra. In his first speech expressing the motivation behind forming al-Nusra in January 2012, al-Jawlani placed retribution alongside enforcing Sharia, which indicates the theme's significance in al-Nusra's narrative and logic. This is how he expressed the motivation behind establishing al-Nusra: "To restore the rule of God to his land and avenge the violated honor and the bleeding blood[228]."

Retribution was promoted as a moral obligation and a duty that must be fulfilled. The notion of retribution stands for reciprocating the violent practices inflicted on "us" and making "them" subject to the same suffering. The categorization of "us" and "them," in the group's narrative, was based on a sectarian logic that views the conflict in Syria as Sunnis versus Nusayris. Al-Nusra promoted itself as a protector of the Sunnis who were suffering from the "Nusayri regime" and views retribution against Nusayris as a form of restoring justice and is religiously justified. After the Assad regime carried out the chemical attack on Eastern Ghouta in August 2013, which killed hundreds of people, al-Jawlani promised retribution against Nusayri villages in his speech "an eye for an eye" directly expressing the logic of tit-for-tat strategy[229].

Capitalizing on the victimhood sentiment among Syrian Sunnis due to the sectarian practices the Assad regime has institutionalized during its rule, al-Nusra demonized the whole Nusayri sect as responsible for the regime violations including systematic murder and torture, massacres, and forced displacement. Consequently, the narrative portrayed sectarian vendetta as a natural result of the regime's sectarian practices - which was used to justify the sectarian retribution al-Nusra promoted[230].

Sectarian acts of retribution, such as launching shells on villages populated by Nusayris, were seen as just and legitimized means to deter the regime from continuing to bombard cities and towns populated by Sunnis. This is how al-Jawlani expressed sectarian retribution: "If they refrain from

[228] "Al-Iʿlān ʿan Jabhat al-Nuṣrah" [Announcement of al-Nusra Front], *ibid.*
[229] "Al-ʿAyn bi-l-ʿAyn" [An Eye for an Eye], *ibid.* See Appendix (A8.1.)
[230] "Bila Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Istratijiyya Nash'at Jaysh al-Fath wa Muhimmat Jabhat al-Nusra fi Suriya (1)" [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. The Strategy of the Emergence of the Army of Conquest and the Mission of al-Nusra in Syria (1)], 5:00-9:00, *ibid.* See Appendix (A8.2.)

[bombarding] the towns and cities of the Sunni people, we shall refrain from [bombarding] theirs [Nusayri villages] and will not aggress. Whoever treats likewise is not committing oppression[231]."

Furthermore, the "eye for an eye" logic does not merely stem from a sectarian mindset, but it is a logic embedded in the group's way of war. A logic implying that any acts of violence from any party will be met by the same means of violence by the group. This logic was evident in al-Jawlani's call to target Russia in the Caucasus the same way the latter targeted soldiers or people in the Levant, referring to the Russian intervention in the Syrian conflict in September 2015[232].

As retribution was perceived and promoted by the group as just and legitimate, it was interconnected with the notion that "we only fight with those who fight against us." The objective here was to self-identify as an actor driven by moral principles, not mere sectarian motives, and project their violent practices as defensive mechanisms rather than offensive ones. In this sense, the group did not categorize Druze and Christian minorities as enemies or targets, at least in its narrative, the way it categorized the Nusayri sect. In this context, al-Jawlani stated: "We do not fight those who do not fight us. There are Druze villages that did not support Bashar al-Assad, did not fight, and are located in liberated areas. They have not been harmed… We don't have a war now with the Christians. We are not holding the Christians responsible for what America is doing now[233]."

Emphasizing morality to justify their ongoing practices and make a distinction between moral "us" and immoral "them" was essential in the group's narrative. By labeling itself with justice and mercy and its adversaries as murderers and criminals, the group sought to attain a high moral ground and asserted the "us" and "them" distinction. This was manifested in al-Jawlani's ironic call on Alawites in 2015 to disassociate themselves from the Assad regime and their religious beliefs in exchange for protection[234].

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[231] "Al-Tadakhul al-Rusi, al-Sahm al-Akhir" [The Russian Intervention, the Last Arrow], *ibid.*
[232] *ibid.* See Appendix (A8.3.)
[233] "Bila Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Istratijiyya Nash'at Jaysh al-Fath wa Muhimmat Jabhat al-Nusra fi Suriya (1)" [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. The Strategy of the Emergence of the Army of Conquest and the Mission of al-Nusra in Syria (1)], 9:00-13:25, *ibid.*
[234] 5:20-9:00, *ibid.* See Appendix (A8.4.)

Morality, in the group's narrative, was framed in a religious context, projecting an image of a moral religious "us" versus an immoral adversary and a way of war that is restricted by ethical standards. This is how al-Jawlani explains it: "Know that war has ethics, and those who adhere to them prevail. Good conduct is Islamic in peace and war. Whoever wins the war but loses ethical conduct has indeed failed. War does not permit some unethical behavior like lying, betrayal, and treachery, even if the enemy does it[235]." This reveals the complexity of the self-perception of al-Nusra. It reveals how the narrative was used to self-identify as "moral" while concurrently extremist violent actions were glorified and carried out.

2.2.9 Agents of the West

Al-Nusra paid significant attention to narrative and discourse in popular sentiment and public opinion and their role in mobilization. In September 2014, when talking about the rise of the so-called *Mujahideen*, al-Jawlani said the following: "the time of the fake media that was able to persuade nations with its agent, infidel, and corrupt rulers has passed[236]." The group's narrative denounces Arab and Muslim states as agents and partners of the West, traitors, infidels, deceivers, and corrupt regimes. This denunciation included also the Syrian opposition's political and armed wings that were supported by regional and/or Western countries. The theme of agents of the West was interconnected with the theme of conspiracy. Arab and Muslim states were denounced as deceivers of their Sunni Muslim populations to serve the Western-centered global order which was viewed by the group as a source of evil. For al-Jawlani, these states were "partners in serving the international system by deceiving and restricting the Sunni people[237]".

The sectarian dimension was evident in this narrative theme mirroring the sectarian dimensions in the theme of victimhood and conspiracy. The Assad regime, labeled as an Alawite security community, was also described in the narrative as a local agent of the West that is mainly responsible for protecting Israeli interests. Al-Jawlani stated: "The international regime consistently seeks to consolidate its power in this country (Syria) through a sect, especially with

[235] "Nasrun min Allah wa Fathun Qarib" [Victory from God and an Imminent Conquest], *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya,* 1 April 2015 (Access: 5 January 2024).
[236] "Li-Ahl al-Wafa' Yahūn al-ʿAṭā'" [For the People of Loyalty, Giving is Easy], *ibid.*
[237] "Liqa' al-Yawm | Qa'id Jabhat al-Nusra: Lan naqbal bi ayy masar siyasi yuḥi nizam Bashar 'ala hisab alam al-sha'b wa tadhihatih" [Today's Meeting | Leader of al-Nusra Front: We will not accept any political path that revives the Bashar regime at the expense of the suffering and sacrifices of the people], *ibid.*

the Alawite sect, as it demonstrated its effectiveness in protecting the borders with Israel and providing all services to the international regime[238]."

To demonize the Arab nation-states, Arab rulers as well as Arab armies were denounced as oppressors and enemies of their people, mainly concerned with preserving their self-interests rather than the public good and the interests of their countries. The special focus was devoted to rulers and the armies aiming at exploiting the popular uprisings suppressed or countered by Arab states during the Arab Spring[239]. The rulers in the Gulf region were portrayed as partners of the Western states, particularly the United States, implying a sense of betrayal by prioritizing an oil-driven partnership, their self-interests, and the interests of their Western partners over the interests of their fellow Arab and Muslim countries leaving them suffering dire circumstances[240].

In parallel with denouncing the Arab and Muslim states as agents of the West, the same labeling was applied to the Syrian political and armed opposition. They were labeled as "local tools" driven by greed for money, betraying the suffering of Muslims, choosing to collaborate with Western and regional states against Jihadists including al-Nusra, and ultimately serving the conspiracy of the "new Crusade"[241].

The Syrian opposition groups were portrayed as the Syrian version of al-Sahawah forces in Iraq - Sunni armed groups that were initially supported by the U.S. in 2005 in Iraq- given that al-Sahawah was already perceived as an enemy and an agent of the U.S. in the Jihadist narrative. Thus, the reference to al-Sahawah was to label the national opposition as an enemy and thus justify fighting its factions - because of their secular motives[242].

In similarity with the case of al-Sahawah, the case of Sharif Hussein was used in the group's narrative as a historical betrayal that paved the way for Western actors to instate their hegemony

[238] *ibid.*
[239] "Bila Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Mawqif Jabhat al-Nusra min al-Rabiʿ al-ʿArabi wa Ra'ayhim fi al-Ikhwan wa Tanzim al-Dawla (2)" [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. al-Nusra's Position on the Arab Spring and Their Opinion on the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State (2)], 19:00-24:00, *ibid.* See Appendix (A9.1.)
[240] *ibid.* See Appendix (A9.2.)
[241] "Li-Ahl al-Wafa' Yahūn al-ʿAṭā'" [For the People of Loyalty, Giving is Easy], *ibid.* See Appendix (A9.3.)
[242] "Laytaka Rathaytani" [I Wish You Had Mourned Me], *ibid.* See Appendix (A9.5.)

in the Middle East without bringing any personal privileges to Sharif Hussein who was exiled. The reference to al-Sahawah as well as to Sharif Hussein, implies a deterministic view in which the collaboration of the opposition with Western actors will lead to the same consequences. Thus, such cooperation was defined as an act of betrayal that should be countered. In other words, collaboration with the Western states was not only deemed normatively unacceptable in the group's narrative, but also not practical[243].

By demonizing the opposition as local agents that operate according to the Western agenda, that is, mainly concerned with countering Islamist groups including al-Nusra, the group justified its combats against local opposition factions as in the case of the group of "Jamal Maarouf," which was named by al-Jawlani as a target and eliminated by al-Nusra. This case will be illustrated in the strategies section below[244]. In this context, al-Nusra's narrative glorified Jihadists as sincere and strong fighters and defenders of the "Ummah" seeking to achieve victory and glory of Islam while the opposition factions were portrayed as agents of the West, who pursued the Western and regional support and agendas of fighting al-Nusra[245].

2.2.10 The Folly of the Far Enemy

Al-Nusra narrated the far enemy, the Western states, as lacking a sense of strategy in their fight against Jihadist groups, particularly al-Qaeda. Events such as the overthrow of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan in 2001 were used by the group to imply a strategic miscalculation by the Western states. Jihadists, in this narrative, were praised for taking advantage of the "folly" decisions of Western policymakers in Afghanistan and expanding influence across countries including Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Mali, Algeria, Iraq, and Syria. The group looked at their new experience in Syria through the lens of al-Qaeda's experience in Afghanistan implying deterministic thinking in terms of the outcome, that is, the survival and the expansion of Jihadists[246]. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were perceived as vital by the group, labeled as the heaviest defeats of the U.S. in modern

[243] "Li-Ahl al-Wafa' Yahūn al-ʿAṭā'" [For the People of Loyalty, Giving is Easy], *ibid.* See Appendix (A9.5.)
[244] "Al-Liqa' al-Sawti al-Awwal ma'a al-Shaykh al-Fatih" [The First Audio Interview with Sheikh al-Fatih], *ibid.* See Appendix (A9.6.)
[245] "Nasrun min Allah wa Fathun Qarib" [Victory from God and an Imminent Conquest], *ibid.* See Appendix (A9.7.)
[246] "Li-Ahl al-Wafa' Yahūn al-ʿAṭā'" [For the People of Loyalty, Giving is Easy], *ibid.* See Appendix (A10.1.)

history, and the reason why the U.S. could not achieve its objectives in the Middle East. This is how al-Jawlani explained the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq:

> "What ultimately happened in Iraq was the defeat of the Americans, and what ultimately happened in Afghanistan was the defeat of the Americans there. It is the failure of a very large project that almost swallowed up the region, which the United States was working on. America didn't lose a war even in World War II[247]."

The wars of Afghanistan and Iraq were glorified in the group's narrative as a turning point that impelled the U.S. to change its strategy in the Middle East. The group perceived the U.S. strategy to disengage from the Middle East as a regression and an opportunity to be taken advantage of by Jihadists and al-Qaeda. Al-Jawlani projected an image that Jihadists and al-Qaeda were undefeatable because the U.S. was unable to carry out a ground invasion and that intelligence and drones' operations were incapable of eradicating armed groups[248].

What's more, the wars of Afghanistan and Iraq were also used as examples to address the question of the outcome of the Russian intervention in Syria implying a deterministic thinking, that is, an ultimate Russian defeat and victory for Jihadists. For al-Jawlani, "Russians have overlooked that the decline of the American role is due to the successes that the God granted to the *mujahideen* in both Afghanistan and Iraq, which led to the failure of the Americans in the region[249]." In sum, the failure of military interventions to eradicate Jihadist movements, such as the case of Afghanistan, was perceived and used as evidence indicating the potential of al-Nusra's survival in Syria – while the inflicted damage on Jihadist groups during military interventions were merely seen as side effects.

2.3 Strategies

After dwelling on the narrative, the question is: How did this narrative influence actions and impact the overall strategies on the ground? The answer is not simple. That is because of the complex

[247] "Mu'tamar Sahafi" [Press Conference], *ibid.*
[248] "Bila Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Mawqif Jabhat al-Nusra min al-Rabiʿ al-ʿArabi wa Ra'ayhim fi al-Ikhwan wa Tanzim al-Dawla (2)" [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. al-Nusra's Position on the Arab Spring and Their Opinion on the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State (2)], 11:00-13:00, *ibid.* See Appendix (A10.2.)
[249] "Al-Tadakhul al-Rusi, al-Sahm al-Akhir" [The Russian Intervention, the Last Arrow], *ibid.*

interconnection between the narrative and strategies, i.e. its role in driving and/or justifying actions, which will be addressed in the themes below. While it is significant to understand the worldview – expressed in narratives – and the desired ends of a specific insurgency, politically motivated VNSA, it is also crucial to understand the strategic means employed in practice to achieve the ends[250]. In other words, strategies employed by VNSAs are vital in studying the strategic culture of such actors. The strategic practices of the al-Nusra Front, as in the case of al-Qaeda, were based on the tactics of asymmetric warfare including bombing, suicide attacks, assassinations, kidnapping, and raids.

Nevertheless, what makes the strategic practices and thus the strategic culture of the al-Nusra Front distinctive from that of al-Qaeda was its domestic focus and the ability to adapt to the objective conditions. By relying on the former military experiences of its cadres in guerilla fighting and keeping its domestic focus, the group managed to operate effectively and establish itself as a crucial partner for the insurgency, especially those with Islamist orientation, and thus become, by time, part of the local setting in Syria. This section discusses how the strategic practices of al-Nusra - which served the group in its survival mission under the leadership of al-Jawlani - had been shaped according to the conditions of the strategic environment and how the group's narrative drove or justified its practices.

2.3.1 Targeting the Near Enemy(s): A Domestic Focus Strategy

There is no doubt that al-Nusra's narrative devoted a great deal of attention to the "near enemy", the Assad regime, which was also manifested in practice in its domestic focus against the regime inflicting serious damages on it through insurgency practices – which will be elaborated in detail in the insurgency sub-section. Al-Nusra fought also against the Iranian-backed militias, particularly Hezbollah, coded in its narrative as "Rafida[251]" - which will be dwelled on in detail in the regionalization subsection below. In addition, the group had targeted the U.S-backed opposition

[250] Michael F. Morris, *Al-Qaeda: Through the Lens of Global Insurgency*, (CRC Press eBooks, 2015), 78.
[251] Rafida means 'rejectors'. It is a term that refers Shia Muslims who reject the legitimacy of the Islamic Rashidun Caliphates of Abu Bakr (D.643), Omar Ibn al-Khattab (D.644), Othman Ibn Affan (D.656) in favor of Ali Ibn Abi Talib (D.661).

forces coded as “agents of the West” or “al-Sahawah,” and later ISIS coded as Kharijites in al-Nusra’s narrative.

It can be argued that Al-Nusra’s organic ties with al-Qaeda and its strategic ambitions that had been closely associated with al-Qaeda’s global Jihadi mindset aiming at establishing an Islamic Emirate in Syria and ultimately a transnational Caliphate was not, by any means, achievable nor realistic. In contrast, by taking place in the Syrian conflict, the group had to adapt itself to the local dynamics pursuing a more pragmatic and flexible strategy to ensure its survival. The domestic focus strategy and the group’s devotion to fighting the “near enemy” rather than the “far one” in the Jihadist sense, echoed the expectations of the local populations that had been mobilized against the Assad regime aiming at toppling it. This dynamic led the Jihadist group to get, to some extent, transformed into a local-Jihadist actor that operated, to varying extents, in line with the local political demands[252].

While al-Nusra had demonstrated considerable flexibility in coordinating its activities with other armed groups in Syria, the Jihadist group remained skeptical toward the Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions supported by regional and Western powers. As they were labeled as “Sahawah” or “agents of the West”, al-Nusra had systematically waged offensives against them resulting in the defeat or the decline of these groups. Al-Nusra’s hostile attitude toward FSA factions started to take place in early 2014. Two dynamics contributed to that: a) the expulsion of the ISIS in early 2014 from Northwestern Syria where al-Nusra became the prominent Jihadist group in the region and b) the arrival of the American anti-tank weapons in support of moderate FSA factions. These two dynamics generated questions regarding the potential of targeting al-Nusra after the ISIS[253].

Al-Nusra's suspicions of the Western-backed factions were growing, particularly after the group was targeted by the US-led coalition right after its formation in September 2014. Two months afterward in November 2014, al-Nusra defeated two major Western-supported FSA factions -the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) and Haraket Hazem (HH)- after months of hostilities. Al-Nusra took over the stronghold of the SRF and the headquarters of HH in Northwestern Syria. It forced

[252] Adraoui, “The Case of Jabhat Al-Nusra in the Syrian Conflict 2011–2016”, *ibid*., 261.
[253] Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 186.

the leader of the SRF, Jamal Marouf to flee to the Turkish border. Al-Nusra justified its military campaign under the pretext of fighting corruption, seizing the local bad reputation of the SRF[254].

While al-Nusra perceived the Western-backed factions as a vital threat, on the one hand, the rise of ISIS and its declaration of a Caliphate was also a serious threat, on the other. ISIS's superior capacity to recruit Jihadists from across the world and from al-Nusra itself had posed a serious challenge for al-Nusra and its mother organization, al-Qaeda. To counter the ISIS, al-Nusra relied on two main strategies. First, it sought help from its mother organization, al-Qaeda, in which several prominent al-Qaeda figures including Sanafi al-Nasr[255] had arrived in Syria aiming at bolstering al-Nusra's Jihadist legitimacy against the ISIS[256]. Second, al-Nusra militarily coordinated with other armed groups to fight against the ISIS, quite before its military campaigns against Western-backed FSA factions. In early January 2014, al-Nusra joined other armed groups in Syria ranging from FSA factions to Islamists and Salafists, to fight against ISIS and eventually drive it out of Northwestern Syria[257].

In sum, the objective conditions of the strategic environment of the Syrian conflict forced the group to adapt its strategy and direct it toward domestic ends to survive. This process of adaption and domestic focus resulted in a focus on targeting the near enemy(s) in the operational realm and instrumentalizing its narrative to justify the fact that the group refrained from carrying out attacks against the far enemy.

2.3.2 Regionalization: A Failed Strategy

Al-Nusra's denial of national borders in its narrative had been partially reflected in its practices, limited to attempts to expand its operations to Lebanon - a country considered part of the *Bilad al-*

[254] Erika Solomon, "Nusra Fighters Oust Moderate Rebels from Syria Stronghold", *Financial Times*, 3 November 2014 (Access: 6 February 2024).
[255] Sanafi al-Nasr is a core al-Qaeda strategist coming from a family with a longstanding Jihadist background, on Saudi Arabia's most wanted list, and was later killed in the U.S. strike on the group in Syria. See Kevin Jackson, "From Khorasan to the Levant: A Profile of Sanafi al-Nasr", Combating Terrorism Center, September 2015 (Access: 9 February 2024).
[256] *ibid.*
[257] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad,* 185.

Sham or the Levant which is a historical geographical term used by the group in its narrative as a sign of its commitment to the historical heritage and its denial of modern national borders. The involvement of the Lebanese Hezbollah in the Syrian conflict and its support to the Assad regime resulted in direct confrontation with al-Nusra Front which did not only targeted Hezbollah in Syria but also in Lebanon. This, in turn, paved the way for Lebanon's Jihadist groups to rise posing the risk of a spillover of the Syrian conflict to Lebanon[258].

Areas populated by Sunnis in northeastern Lebanon such as Masharih al-Qaa and Jdeidah near Arsal had established themselves to be a backyard for the Syrian opposition for weaponry importing as well as for medical treatment of wounded fighters. Later, with the intensification of the conflict in 2013, the same towns served as strategic depth for al-Nusra to expand its operations into Lebanon[259]. Al-Nusra managed to appeal to Sunni Lebanese locals who were already resentful of Hezbollah because of its military intervention on the side of the Assad regime in Syria, recruiting some in its ranks in Syria before returning to Lebanon to carry out attacks there[260].

Similarly, ISIS had also been capable of recruiting Lebanese Sunnis, as well as operating and waging deadly attacks including suicide bombings in Lebanon[261]. However, al-Nusra had managed to establish itself as the most prominent armed group in the area due to its ability to coordinate with other groups, manage intergroup rivalry and infighting, and maintain access to resources[262].

Al-Nusra had worked on forging contact with other radical groups, particularly, Fatah al-Islam and Abdullah Azzam Brigades, to expand its operations to Lebanon where the preparation process had taken months before achieving results[263]. Fatah al-Islam is a radical Jihadist group formed in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and designated as a terrorist group by the U.S. and Lebanese governments. The group had operated against the Assad regime in Syria where even the head of its

[258] William Young *et al.*, *Spillover from the Conflict in Syria: An Assessment of the Factors that Aid and Impede the Spread of Violence* (Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation, 2014), 26-27.
[259] Lister*, The Syrian Jihad,* 86.
[260] Raphaël Lefèvre, "Tackling Sunni Radicalization in Lebanon", Carnegie Middle East Center, 24 December 2014 (Access: 9 February 2024).
[261] Hassan Rabih, "The Beirut Bombings and the Islamic State's Threat to Lebanon", Combating Terrorism Center, December 2015 (Access: 1 February 2024).
[262] Benedetta Berti, *Lebanon and the Rise of the Islamic State* (The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), 2016), 144.
[263] Lister*, The Syrian Jihad,* 157.

military wing, the Caliphate Brigades, Nidal al-Asha was killed in Aleppo in 2012[264]. Abdullah Azzam Brigades, al-Qaeda's branch in Lebanon, had operated in Lebanon, Syria, and the Arabian Peninsula, yet the group dissolved itself in 2019[265].

In November 2013, Abdullah Azzam Brigades carried out a deadly suicide attack against the Iranian embassy in Beirut where 22 people were killed and over 140 injured, marking the beginning of a cycle of violence[266]. In February 2014, al-Nusra claimed responsibility for another suicide blast at a Petrol station in Hermel of the Bekaa Valley, which is known to be a Hizbullah stronghold in northeastern Lebanon[267]. Between January and June 2014, several suicide bomb attacks were carried out against various targets in Eastern Lebanon, particularly the Bekaa Valley and in Beirut as well[268].

Al-Nusra's attacks were not merely waged on Hezbollah, but also on the Lebanese Armed Forces. In August 2014, Arsal, a town in Northwestern Lebanon, witnessed a heavy attack by al-Nusra and the ISIS after the Lebanese Armed Forces arrested an al-Nusra-affiliated commander there. As a result, al-Nusra kidnapped 16 Lebanese soldiers who would be later released in a Qatari-brokered swap deal by the end of 2015[269].

The sectarian dimension of al-Nusra's attacks was also evident. In January 2015, al-Nusra carried out two suicide bombings at a cafe in Jebel Mohsen, a predominantly Alawite neighborhood in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli[270]. Al-Nusra would continue to operate within the Lebanese territory until July 2017 when its fighters were deported back to Syria after a deal was brokered between Hezbollah and the group following the latter's military defeat by the former[271]. In sum, al-Nusra failed to expand regionally. This was another objective factor that gave the group no

[264] Aron Lund, "Holy Warriors", *Foreign Policy*, 15 October 2012 (Access: 6 February 2024).
[265] "Abdullah Azzam Brigades", National Counterterrorism Center, October 2022 (Access: 5 February 2024).
[266] "Lebanon suicide blasts hit Iran's embassy in Beirut", *BBC News*, 19 November 2013 (Access: 20 February 2024).
[267] "Timeline: Tension in Lebanon", *Aljazeera*, 25 June 2014 (Access: 5 February 2024).
[268] *ibid.*
[269] Nour Samaha, "Lebanese Army and al-Nusra Front Conduct Prisoner Swap", *Aljazeera,* 2 December 2015 (Access: 4 February 2024).
[270] "Al-Nusra Says Carried Out Northern Lebanon Attacks", *Anadolu Agency*, 10 January 2015 (Access: 4 February 2024).
[271] "Logistics' Hold up Lebanese Deal for Rebels, Refugees to Return to Syria", *Reuters*, 12 August 2017 (Access: 4 February 2024).

choice but to integrate into the Syrian national setting, i.e. further advancing its transformation process after breaking ties with al-Qaeda.

2.3.3 Localization: Integration into the Local Setting

Al-Nusra's objective to transform the Syrian society and the element of solidarity with local Sunni populations shaped the group's strategy to establish and maintain local networks as a means of survival and achieving its objective. By getting integrated into the local setting, the group thought to achieve the mentioned objective of transforming the Syrian society, however, this integration compelled the group to adapt its strategic culture to fit the local environment.

Al-Nusra's domestic focus strategy prompted the group to adopt highly flexible practices in terms of its relations with the Syrian opposition armed groups. Al-Nusra managed to intertwine itself with these groups and ultimately influence the whole local dynamics on the ground. Both "military operations rooms", which were operational coordination umbrellas among armed groups, and governance bodies were the means al-Nusra used in its localization strategy. Its high capacity to adapt, chameleon-like, has helped the group to have significant influence over security and governance in rebel-held Syria[272].

In terms of military coalitions or the "joint military operation room(s)", al-Nusra was a member of at least 9 of the most significant 20 operation rooms across Syria by 2016[273]. The group's coordination and involvement in joint operations with other armed opposition groups in Syria started prominently in mid-2012, first with groups of Islamist outlooks such as Liwa al-Tawhid and Kataib Ahrar al-Sham and later with other FSA factions intertwining itself with the Syrian opposition and integrating itself into the local security setting[274].

Ahrar al-Sham, the largest armed group in Syria by early 2013, played a crucial role in enabling al-Nusra to become part of the armed opposition. This military cooperation - which was itself a

[272] Jennifer Cafarella *et al.*, "*Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength"*, The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) (*E-publishing:* ISW 2016), 19.
[273] *ibid*.
[274] Lister*, The Syrian Jihad,* 84.

widespread strategy among rebel groups in Syria - had led both Ahrar al-Sham and al-Nusra to inflict strategic defeats on the Assad regime including seizing control of Taftanaz Air Base in Idlib province in January 2013 and the capture of Raqqa province in March 2013. Nevertheless, the most strategic victory of the two groups occurred between March and May 2015, when the umbrella of Jaish al-Fath, mainly composed of the two organizations along with other relatively small groups such as Jund al-Aqsa, Faylaq al-Sham, Ajnad al-Sham, Liwa al-Haq and Jaish al-Sunnah, launched a major offensive in Idlib province and managed to capture the city of Idlib and its surroundings, Jisr al-Shughur and Ariha, seizing total control of the governorate over a very short time[275].

In addition, numerous joint operations were conducted between 2012 and 2016 across Syria. For instance, the offensive of Northern Latakia in March 2014 launched by al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Kataib Ansar al-Sham, Junud al-Sham and Harakat Sham al-Islam[276], the Quneitra offensive in August 2014 launched by Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and FSA factions[277], and the Aleppo offensive in July 2015 launched by Jihadist and Islamist-dominated armed groups including al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham under the name of Ansar al-Sharia operation room[278].

In terms of governance bodies, despite the resistance al-Nusra faced from Syrian rebels due to its hardline ideology, its ability to adapt in order to influence enabled the group to be part of the 12 governance bodies across the rebel-held Syrian territories[279]. As it formulated an image of adopting a 'people-oriented' strategy by dedicating efforts to provide services and security needs of locals and distancing itself from the ISIS and the latter's brutal manner of enforcing religion and relevant punishments on local populations, al-Nusra sought to establish and maintain extensive relationships with local communities[280]. This is not to imply that al-Nusra did not enforce harsh measures including executions carried out by its "Islamic courts" which sparked local resentment toward the group from time to time. However, the issue that locals' main contention and fear was

[275] Guido Steinberg, "*Ahrar al-Sham: The 'Syrian Taliban'",* The German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) (*E-publishing:* SWP*,* 2016), 4.
[276] Isabel Nassief and Charlie Caris, "Rebels Reopen the Latakia Front", *The Institute for the Study of War (ISW)*, 9 April 2014 (Access: 26 January 2024).
[277] Ben Wedeman and Michael Pearson, "Syrian rebels, al Qaeda-linked militants seize Golan Heights border crossing", *CNN World*, 28 August 2014 (Access: 26 January 2024).
[278] Bassem Mroue, "Militants, Rebels in Syria Announce New Push for Aleppo", *Associated Press*, 3 July 2015 (Access: 26 January 2024).
[279] Cafarella *et al*., "Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength", 19.
[280] Adraoui, "The Case of Jabhat Al-Nusra in the Syrian Conflict 2011–2016", 263.

stemming from the brutality of the regime, and al-Nusra's capacity to relatively fill the governance void and provide services helped the group maintain support from parts of the local community[281].

Establishing and maintaining local networks through providing services served the group well in its objective to govern and transform the Syrian society, taking advantage of the poor efficiency of the local FSA factions in running services. For instance, during the winter of 2012-2013 when the Syrian conflict was at full scale, al-Nusra, often through its "Department of Relief", had proved to be more efficient than FSA brigades in Aleppo, many of whom lacked the capacity to manage the distribution networks, especially with the shortage of supplies, leaving civilians to suffer for days. Al-Nusra, perhaps due to its former experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, managed to control the supply sources, such as grain compounds, and undertake the control of a distribution network, often ensuring more sufficient food supplies to locals[282].

From 2013 onwards, al-Nusra began to establish governance bodies in Syria that amounted to proto-state institutions, the so-called Sharia Commissions/Committees that are often composed of several component bureaus including judicial, administrative, and management of services, aid, etc. While some bodies were directed unilaterally by al-Nusra such as Dar al-Qadaa-affiliated courts of Sarmada, Salqin, and Latakia, the majority of the governance bodies, most prominently Aleppo Sharia Commission, Eastern Sharia Committee, Eastern Ghouta Courthouse, Dera Sharia Commission were jointly directed with other groups. Al-Nusra's willingness to establish joint governance bodies with other rebel groups enabled the former to provide local legitimacy to its role in governing localities. By compromising some aspects of its hardline version of Sharia law, adjusting it to reflect the local traditions and expectations as well as the preferences of its allies whose Islamist orientation did not match the same hardline stance of al-Nusra, the latter managed to have a say over governance and maintain social networks in the rebel-held Syria[283].

[281] *ibid*., 266.
[282] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad,* 102.
[283] Jennifer Cafarella, "Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria: An Islamic Emirate for al-Qaeda*"*, The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) (E-publishing: ISW, 2014), 37-4.

2.3.4 Insurgency

It should be pointed out that Al-Nusra benefited from the previous jihadist experiences of its founders in Afghanistan and Iraq, which were key historical sources of the group's strategic culture and its way of war. The elements of sacrifice, masculinity, heroism, tit-for-tat logic, revenge, and domestic focus in the group's narrative shaped its practices of guerilla fight on the ground.

By using tactics of guerilla fight, al-Qaeda has long used, such as suicide attacks, bombings, and raids as a way of war, the group sought to inflict serious damage on its near enemy, the Assad regime. In addition, with the growing influence of Islamist armed groups in the Syrian security scene, al-Nusra had coordinated closely with other Islamist groups to wage attacks aiming at inflicting zero-sum defeat and taking over regime military posts and bases including airports, many of which resulted in success. This coordination highlights the group's ability to adapt to the local setting and ultimately become part of it, its domestic focus, the notion of learning from past mistakes expressed in its narrative, and its aspiration for territorial control.

In sum, the practices of guerilla fight were used as a means to ultimately achieve territorial gains, prove itself vital for the insurgency, and thereby become part of the conflict setting. The following two subsections will dwell on, first, how suicide attacks and bombings served the group in its war against the near enemy; second, how kidnapping was used against the far enemy and how the group's actions toward the far enemy were constrained.

2.3.4.1 Suicide Attacks and Bombings

Since the very beginning of the Syrian conflict in late 2011, suicide attacks and bombings were the first strategic practices al-Nusra employed against the near enemy in Syria, yet certainly, the most significant military-wise practice that consolidated the group's role in the security scene of the Syrian conflict. Suicide attacks, as strategic practices, were driven and justified by the narrative of sacrifice/martyrdom and fierceness that intended to project a strong image and a powerful military reputation. In addition, the sectarian motivation expressed in al-Nusra's narrative was also evident in the selection of numerous targets by the group.

According to the U.S. State Department records, from November 2011 until the end of 2012, al-Nusra conducted tens of suicide attacks along with hundreds of IED [improvised explosive device] bombings and small arms attacks against vital sites in major provinces. The group carried out more than 40 suicide attacks, small arms, and IED operations in major city centers including Damascus, Aleppo, Hamah, Dara, Homs, Idlib, and Deir ez Zour. These attacks involved, for instance, two suicide car bombs at a military complex in Damascus where 4 were killed and 14 wounded including civilians in September 2012, 4 bombings including two suicide ones in Aleppo where at least 50 people were killed in October 2012, a suicide bomb attack targeting the Air Force Intelligence compound in Damascus where more than 100 were killed or wounded[284].

By using suicide attacks before carrying out ground assaults aiming at capturing military positions or significant territory, al-Nusra sought to utilize suicide attacks as military leverage against the regime as well as to gain its powerful military reputation among armed groups in Syria. Despite that many of its early suicide attacks, such as the attack on Hamdan military airport near al-Bukamal in Deir ez Zour and the attack on al-Hayat hospital that was transformed into a military position in Aleppo in September 2012, had not resulted in the actual capture of significant military positions or territory; the attacks enabled the group to demonstrate their capacity of inflicting serious and unavoidable damage on the regime positions and acquiring their reputation as a militarily powerful group[285].

From October 2012 onwards, suicide attacks began to be more effective in ground offensives, especially with the sophisticated military coordination in utilizing artillery shells, tank fires, and ground assaults from various axes at the same time. Jihadist suicide bombers were used as 'first wave' to target and destroy regime defenses that were almost impossible to penetrate by other means. The use of suicide attacks helped the insurgency to achieve invaluable military successes including the capture of al-Taana air base in October 2012; al-Hamdan air base, Base 46, al-Mayadin artillery base, Marj al-Sultan air base and the Tishrin dam in November 2012; Sheikh

[284] "Country Reports on Terrorism 2012" (United States Department of State Publication, 2013), 282. (Access: 6 February 2024).
[285] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 85.

Suleiman base in December 2012; and Taftanaz air base in January 2013 - which far increased the value of suicide attacks, as a strategic practice, for the group[286].

Between 2013 and 2016, al-Nusra continued to carry out suicide attacks and bombings as a strategic practice of its way of war including a suicide attack on the headquarters of the Military Intelligence in Quneitra in January 2013[287], a suicide truck bomb on Khazanat military complex in southern Idlib in May 2014[288], suicide attacks during the capturing of Idlib province in March 2015, an attack on the headquarters of Air Force intelligence in Aleppo killing approximately 20 intelligence members in March 2015, a suicide attack on a military outpost in Aleppo killing more than 25 soldiers and pro-regime militias in July 2015[289].

The sectarian motivation in several targets was evident, as expressed in the group's narrative of revenge. Christian and Alawite neighborhoods had witnessed numerous suicide attacks carried out by Jihadist groups including al-Nusra. In July 2013, the group carried out one of its deadliest sectarian suicide car bombings in a pro-regime district in Homs, which killed 37 people[290]. Sectarian or revenge-motivated actions were also conducted by the group through other means. For instance, al-Nusra killed fifty-one soldiers in Southwestern Aleppo in July 2013[291], and executed an Alawite cleric in August 2013[292] - the acts were obviously driven by the narrative of sectarian revenge, and a tit-for-tat logic to challenge the regime through reciprocating sectarian violence.

Bombings were also used as a means of assassinations, i.e. targeting and killing high-profile figures, aiming at terrorizing and inflicting damage on the near enemy, the Assad regime in this case. For example, in August 2013, al-Nusra assassinated the governor of Hama governorate, Anas

[286] *ibid*., 110.
[287] "Syria Suicide Attack on Regime Kills 53: Watchdog", *Al-Arabiya*, 2 February 2013 (Access: 6 February 2024).
[288] "Bil-Fidyū al-Ḥurr Yusayṭir ʿalā Akbar Maʿāqil al-Niẓām bi-Khān Shaykhūn" [Video: The Free Army Controls the Largest Regime Stronghold in Khan Shaykhun], *Al-Arabiya*, 26 May 2014 (Access: 6 February 2024).
[289] *Country Reports on Terrorism 2015* (United States Department of State Publication, 2016), 389. (Access: 6 February 2024).
[290] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 153.
[291] Hania Mourtada and Rick Gladstone, "Soldiers' Mass Execution Reported by Syria Group", *The New York Times,* 26 July 2013 (Access: 6 February 2024).
[292] "Syria Rebels Seize Strategic Town, Execute Alawite Cleric; Activists", *Reuters*, 26 August 2013 (Access: 6 February 2024).

Abdul Razak, in a car bomb attack[293]. To conclude, suicide attacks and bombings were what gave al-Nusra its 'strong' image and reputation, and thus rendered it important for the less experienced armed groups in their struggle against the regime.

2.3.4.2 Kidnapping and Abduction

Kidnapping had not been used by al-Nusra as an act of terrorization the way its rival the ISIS has done. Rather, kidnapping had been used as a means to achieve certain demands from the near enemy or the far enemy, in which the group participated in negotiations in this regard. It also propagated, in some cases, that the act of kidnapping was to ensure the "protection" of the kidnapped aiming at countering the legitimate perception of the Jihadist groups as savage ones. This highlights how the group's domestic focus strategy, along with the self-image of moral "us" and "we are not criminals" notion in the group's narrative of morality constrained the group's actions toward its far enemy.

In October 2012, al-Nusra kidnapped American journalist, Peter Theo Curtis, before he was released in August 2014 after Qatari mediation efforts[294]. This was the first kidnapping incident by the group to ring a global alarm, yet the most significant abduction action was carried out against the UN peacekeepers. In August 2013, al-Nusra abducted 45 Fijian UN peacekeepers in the Golan Heights, between Syria and Israel. They were released after two weeks as a result of a Qatari mediation, too. Another two groups of Filipino peacekeepers were trapped at two different UN encampments, but they managed to escape later. Remarkably, during the negotiations, al-Nusra asked to be delisted from the list of designated terrorist organizations among other demands. These included an acknowledgment by the UN that 44 Fijian peacekeepers were removed "for their own protection," rejecting to admit committing an act of kidnapping - which was the only demand to be met[295].

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[293] "Syria's al-Nusra Front Claims Assassination of Hama Governor", *Al-Arabiya News*, 7 September 2013 (Access: 6 February 2024).
[294] "Kidnapped US Journalist Freed in Syria", *Aljazeera*, 25 August 2014 (Access: 6 February 2024).
[295] Baz Ratner, "Syria's Nusra Front Releases U.N. Peacekeepers in Golan", *Reuters*, 12 September 2014 (Access: 6 February 2024). See also: Louis Charbonneau and Manuel Mogato "How U.N. Troops Defied Orders, Opened Fire and Escaped Syrian Rebels", *Reuters*, 12 September (Access: 6 February 2024).

In December 2013, al-Nusra abducted a group of Orthodox nuns from a convent in Maaloula in the countryside of Damascus. The group was released after another Qatari mediation that involved a prisoner exchange deal with the Assad regime by which the latter released 150 women and children. Although some sources suggested that the deal involved a payment by Qatar to the group in exchange for the release of the nuns, these suggestions were not officially confirmed. Despite the obvious practice of abduction, the group propagated that the nuns were protected from regime shelling[296], which highlights the group's narrative of "we don't fight those who don't fight us" and its efforts to distance itself from the savage image of ISIS.

2.4 Key Characteristics of al-Nusra's Strategic Culture

After delving into al-Nusra's narrative and strategies separately, it is obvious that these two went hand in hand in shaping the group's strategic culture. The narrative reveals the key ideological and cultural codes that drive and/or legitimize the group's strategies in practice. It provides the group with answers to the primary questions of its ultimate objective, the sense of identity, the categories of 'us' and 'them', the primary and secondary enemies of the group, the very reason why to fight, and how to carry on an armed struggle. Although these are driven by the jihadist ideology, they are adjusted to the local context. The strategies reveal the group's dependence on al-Qaeda's asymmetric warfare tactics. Nevertheless, they indicate the group's ability to operate according to strategic calculations, rather than being dependent merely on ideological motives.

The combination of al-Nusra's narrative and strategies reveals key characteristics of its strategic culture. These are a) the complex relation to old and modern history as a source of strategic culture, b) the strategic cultural flexibility, i.e. the ability and capacity to learn and adapt in response to the strategic environment, and c) the strategic resilience as a core element to handle strategic and tactical challenges and difficulties.

[296] "Syria Crisis: Nuns Freed by Rebels Arrive in Damascus", *BBC News*, 10 March 2014 (Access: 6 February 2024).

CHAPTER THREE

3 HAYAT TAHRIR AL-SHAM (HTS): ANALYSIS OF STRATEGIC CULTURE

3.1 Introduction

After almost 8 years since Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) broke ties with al-Qaeda (AQ), many still view the group through the lens of its initial stage under al-Nusra's brand as the AQ affiliate. However, the group has operated under the brand of the HTS, disassociated from the global Jihadist movement, longer than it had actually operated as the AQ affiliate under the brand of al-Nusra. While this statement should not be interpreted as an endorsement of the group neither in terms of minimizing its past baggage nor the threat the group endures to present, one should not fail to recognize the complexity of the situation and its distinctiveness from other Jihadist groups worldwide[297].

Al-Nusra's decision to break ties with the AQ in July 2016 and to deny any interest in global Jihad has marked a turning point in the group's evolvement and transformation, as it bolstered the group's localization strategy and clearly surfaced its ambitions for acquiring acceptance and positive recognition. This has been evident in the group's calls to be removed from terrorism lists[298]. The HTS has obviously managed to gain a relevant de-facto acceptance in terms of the U.S. policy toward the group. James F. Jeffery, the former U.S. special representative for Syria, said that the HTS has expressed to Washington through back channels that "we want to be your friend. We're not terrorists. We're just fighting against Assad." Jeffery also said that the U.S. has actually stopped targeting al-Jawlani since 2018 and that it is important to Washington that "the HTS not disintegrate or become a terrorist force[299]."

[297] Aaron Y. Zelin, *The Age of Political Jihadism: A Study of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield 2023). 2.
[298] Gaith Alsayed and Bassem Mroue, "Syria's Main Insurgent Group Seeks to Move Away from al-Qaida Past, Get Off Western Terrorism Lists", *Associate Press*, 14 May 2023 (Access: 18 March 2024).
[299] Martin Smith, "Interview: James Jeffrey", *Frontline*, 8 March 2021 (Access: 18 March 2024).

This highlights the distinctive and complex status of the HTS which has been designated as a terrorist organization, yet kept monitored without subjecting the group to military operations, raising the question of whether the HTS should or should not be removed from the terrorism list. While it endures to hold onto extremist views and continues to somehow glamorize terrorism, its actions –in many aspects– suggest an observable transformation of the group from a terrorist armed group to a de-facto authority. In the words of Aaron Y. Zelin, a prominent scholar on Jihadist groups, the HTS has evolved "from a traditional terrorist group to an entity more akin to other authoritarian leaderships in the region[300]."

The transformation of al-Nusra to the HTS involved a transition period, that is, changing its name to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) in July 2016, when two contradictory tendencies emerged. The first tendency was for the JFS to maintain secret ties with the AQ to alleviate the resentment of AQ's global leadership and its veterans within the group who opposed the formation of the JFS. As Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda, rejected the idea of secret allegiance, many AQ veterans disassociated themselves from the JFS and thus the group failed to legitimize its move within the jihadist realm.

The second tendency was to achieve a full merger with other armed groups of the Syrian spectrum, mainly al-Nusra's greatest enabler Ahrar al-Sham (AaS). While the mainstream leadership of Ahrar al-Sham refrained from such a move fearing being subjected to al-Jawlani's grip, the latter took advantage of a breakaway faction from the AaS, Jaish al-Ahrar under the leadership of Hashem al-Sheikh who agreed to the merger with the JFS in December 2016 and became the first leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in January 2017. The leadership of al-Sheikh – which lasted until October 2017 when al-Jawlani took back the position – served the group to propagate its move as motivated by the principle of unity in the face of critics[301].

The formation of HTS marked the ultimate stage of its ties breaking with the AQ and the beginning of its transformation from an armed group into a de facto authority. This process has been crafted and influenced by three factors: the norm innovation led by its leadership, the internal dynamics of

[300] Zelin, *The Age of Political Jihadism*, 1 and 3.
[301] *ibid*., 17-19.

the conflict and the group's localization strategy, as well as the pressure stemming from the strategic environment, particularly the global efforts to counter terrorism in Syria.

Al-Jawlani has played a central role in directing the group's narrative and strategies since its establishment in 2012. Al-Jawlani has introduced a new distinctive version of Jihadism in Syria, owing to his better understanding of the local dynamics in Syria in comparison with the ISIS or the AQ. In the words of the Syrian intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh, he had a "better understanding of the Syrian environment when compared with the IS[302]." Moreover, his pragmatic approach has enabled him to utilize his connections to the founders of the ISIS to support his mission in Syria, later resort to AQ's global leadership to counter the ISIS that sought to treat al-Nusra as its affiliate in Syria, and finally break up with the AQ distancing the group from global jihad in response to the aforementioned pressure stemming from the strategic environment.

Al-Nusra's localization strategy to get embedded in Syrian society and its alliance with other armed groups are significant for its decision to disassociate from the AQ. First, al-Nusra's allegiance to the AQ was viewed negatively by locals as well as other armed groups including Islamist ones. The AaS, al-Nusra's prominent enabler which started to undergo a process of moderation in 2014 seeking a partnership with the West, particularly U.S. support, openly criticized al-Nusra's ties to the AQ. In a media interview in April 2015, the group's leader Hashim al-Shaikh, who later became the first leader of the HTS after the merger, said that al-Nusra's affiliation with AQ supplied the 'international community' with a pretext to label the Syrian revolution as 'terrorism' and thus harmed the Syrian people[303].

In fact, the influence of Islamist fundamentalism in Syria rang an alarm bell for the U.S. that attempted to initiate programs to support moderate factions, which as elaborated in the second chapter, did not come to fruition due to al-Nusra's hostile position toward them. The increasing influence of Islamist armed groups across the spectrum and the risk of them taking control of Syria was deemed a catastrophic scenario. The former head of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency,

[302] Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2017), 185.
[303] Guido Steinberg, "Ahrar al-Sham - the "Syrian Taliban": Al-Nusra Ally Seeks Partnership with West", Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 6 May 2016 (Access: 17 March 2024).

Michael Hayden, stated in December 2013 that "a Sunni fundamentalist takeover of a significant part of the Middle East geography" means "the explosion of the Syrian state and of the Levant as we know it" and that an Assad's victory – despite how ugly it sounds – would be the best option for Syria[304].

These internal and external factors, all together, have laid down the ground for al-Nusra's transformation to the HTS which endures to be a matter of debate in terms of what the group stands for in its post-al-Qaeda era. This chapter explores the aspects of change in narrative and strategies, and how such aspects impact the overall strategic culture both in terms of the content of this strategic culture and its key characteristics.

3.2 Strategic Narrative

The strategic narrative of the HTS is both a cultural processing of the group's transformation and a cultural outcome of this transformation. It is an outcome of adapting the Jihadist narrative of the group to suit the strategic environment and respond to its internal and external pressure by adopting and absorbing local cultural elements of Syrian revolutionary nationalism. This dynamic reversed aspects of the traditional Jihadist narrative, preserved others, and incorporated new ones culminating in a hybrid narrative that utilitarianly serves the HTS in attaining local acceptance and seeking positive recognition. This section examines the HTS's new narrative including the conflict plot, the main characters of the plot, the group's self-perception, and the key themes that shape the group's worldview, drive and/or provide legitimacy to its practices, concurrently drawing comparison with its old narrative.

3.2.1 Characters and Plot

The group's categorization of friends and enemies, at least in the narrative propagated by its leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, has apparently moved beyond the "near and far enemy" perceptions. Al-Jawlani, seeking to clear out his past baggage, has sought to craft a new image that breaks away

[304] "Ex-CIA Director: Bashar Assad Win May Be Syria's 'Best Option'", *Business Insider*, 13 December 2013 (Access: 17 March 2024).

from AQ's understanding of war and conflict, particularly the near and far enemy logic. In his first interview with an American journalist, Martin Smith, in February 2021, al-Jawlani defined the group's objective as a defensive one, merely concerned with fighting the Assad regime and that the Western states are not perceived as enemies. Emphasizing the significance of the narrative and how his group is labeled, he projected the group as part of the Syrian revolution as a national label and categorized parties against the group's rebranding as enemies and non-enemies implying a new 'us' and 'them' categorization in his narrative[305].

While al-Jawlani used to identify Western states as "international system" or "Crusaders", and Arab and Muslim-majority states as agents of the West by which all were portrayed as conspirers against the "Islamic Umma," he obviously altered his identifications to fit his new categorization of characters. By referring to Arab and Muslim majority states as the "Arab and Islamic Umma" and to Western states as the international community, he attempts to introduce a politically mature image of himself and the group, yet maintaining criticism that appeals to the group's base[306].

The narrated objective of the group in its perception of the conflict, however, has remained offensive and aims at a radical change in the status quo, i.e. seeking full control of Syria. Nevertheless, the identified enemies –the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran– are framed as such in a national context of "liberation and independence". Al-Jawlani pointed out that "we have moved beyond the stage of overthrowing the regime, and we are now in a war for liberation and independence from the Russian and Iranian occupations[307]."

This new story of the conflict –although it incorporated a national element– has not unloaded the al-Nusra's extremist narrative element. Rather, it has incorporated the national element without excluding the extremist one. Portraying the group's enemies as "enemies of the God", the idea of a conspiracy against the Sunnis, and the notion of defending all Muslims worldwide are still all

[305] See Al-Jawlani's interview with Martin Smith, "Abu Mohammad al-Jolani Military Leader, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham", *Frontline*, 1 and 14 February 2021 (Access: 29 April 2024). See Appendix (B1.1)
[306] "Mu'tamar li'l-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' Hawl al-Zilzal alladhi Ta'arrada Lahu Shamal al-Muharrar" [Conference by Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' on the Earthquake that Struck Northern Liberated Areas], *Amjad Media*, 0:00–2:30, 9 February 2023 (Access: 29 May 2024). See Appendix (B1.2)
[307] "Al-Jawlani, "Suriya fi Harb Tahrir wa Istiqlal" [Syria in a War of Liberation and Independence], *Almodon*, 25 December 2019 (Access: 29 May 2024).

evident in the group's story of the conflict. Thus, the group's new story of the conflict implies continuity and change at the same time introducing a hybrid story inclusive of two contradictory elements: the Jihadist and the nationalist[308].

The group's perceptions of its enemies endure to be absolute, at least when it comes to Iran, i.e. perceiving the latter as a historical enemy based on pure sectarianism or a certain interpretation of old history that is in line with the sectarian assumptions. Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani's use of the notion of "historical enemies of Sunni people[309]" is a major indication of the group's perception of the conflict as a sectarian one. In parallel, Iran continues to be looked at through the lens of imperial Persian history that is deemed as defining in Iran's hostile foreign policy in the Middle East including Syria[310].

While the historical Islamic legacy remains central in the group's narrative, the Islamic history is not merely used in the narrative to refer to the "Crusaders" or "Safavid" as historical enemies. Remarkably, Islamic legacy is used as a source of Islamic and national glory at the same time overestimating the power of the Damascus-based Umayyad Empire as well as emphasizing concepts that are more relevant to the Syrian national sense of pride such as civilization, science, and knowledge. In al-Jawlani's words, "Syria has always been, through its illustrious history, a significant place for civilization, science, and knowledge. Damascus ruled over two-thirds of the world under Islam, from its east to its west[311]."

The sense of historical victimhood and the notion of restoring the Islamic glory is still evident, yet, it can be said, with a less acute discourse than the one used in al-Nusra's period. While the age of national states is perceived as a humiliation to the "Umma" that altered its Islamic identity and

[308] New Video Message from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani: "A Session With Inghimasis" of the Red Bands in West Aleppo", *Jihadology*, 4 February 2020 (Access: 29 April 2024). See Appendix (B1.3).
[309] "Mu'ayidat al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' li-Ahali wa Wujaha' Mintaqat Idlib" [Leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani's Greetings to the People and Notables of the Idlib Region], *Amjad Media*, 42:25–43:15, 12 July 2022, (Access: 28 April 2024).
[310] See Al-Jawlani's interview with Martin Smith, *ibid*. See Appendix (B1.4)
[311] "Kalima bi-Munasabat Dhikra al-Thawra al-Thaniyya 'Ashara" [Speech on the Occasion of the Twelfth Anniversary of the Revolution], *Amjad Media*, 0:45-1:00, 17 March 2023 (Access: 29 May 2024).

principles, Western powers are not explicitly mentioned as sponsors of the so-called "humiliation"[312].

The HTS's theory of victory seems to remain zero-sum and deterministic, a belief in a victory sooner or later. Portraying the conflict as a zero-sum (win-lose), a holy war between the "truth and falsehood" endures to be part of the group's perception of the conflict. The emphasis on the inevitable victory in the battle quite indicates the determinism element that seems to resonate within the group's circles, motivate its fighters, and project a strong image of both the leader of the group and the group itself. This zero-sum radical element of the group's perception of the conflict is actively used against perceived threats. For instance, after the talks of normalization with the Assad regime al-Jawlani appeared in a video titled "We Will not Reconcile" portraying the war as a zero-sum one:

> "O people, our battle is not a political battle where people compete for positions, nor is it a civil war within the same household. Rather, it is a battle between truth and falsehood, its night is like its day, and whoever separates from it is to be destroyed. Whoever stands with it will be saved, and whoever leaves it will lose, and whoever opposes it will perish. So, contemplate and do not lean towards those who have wronged, else you will incur the fire[313]."

In sum, the decreasing relevance of the traditional Jihadist worldview does not mean the end of its influence or implication for HTS's transformed narrative. Rather, it seems like al-Jawlani has delicately worked on reconciling two contradictory elements, the Jihadist and the nationalist, adopting the local cultural codes while concurrently integrating its own cultural ones into the local setting.

3.2.2 Revolution and Jihad

In al-Nusra's period, Sharia and establishing the "rule of Islam" was a defining theme in the group's narrative echoing its Jihadist motivation and ideology. The group's transformation to the HTS involved its adaption of the notion of the Syrian revolution identifying itself as part of the

[312] "Mu'ayidat al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' li-Ahali wa Wujaha' Mintaqat Idlib" [Leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani's Greetings to the People and Notables of the Idlib Region], *ibid*., 8:25 – 9:50. See Appendix (B1.5.)
[313] "Kalima Mar'iyya li'l-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' bi-Unwan 'Lan Nusalih'" [Video Speech by Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' Titled 'We Will Not Reconcile'], *Amjad Media*, 2:00-2:25, 24 January 2023 (Access: 29 May 2024).

revolution after years of denouncing national notions. In his interview with Smith, al-Jawlani stated that his group represented "one part of a major event in the Syrian revolution", and they had "a mission to accurately communicate the true image of the Syrian revolution to the world[314]."

Although al-Jawlani's words were aimed at the West, it can be said that they are also consistent with his discourse aimed at the local audience. Nevertheless, the adoption of the notion of the Syrian revolution has not completely reversed the group's old jihadist views on "the rule of Islam", it rather reintroduced these views in a hybrid form inclusive of national revolutionary and Islamist codes. Al-Jawlani defines his group's rule as a rule of "Islam and the revolution" that represents dignity and honor versus the rule of the regime which is deemed as a source of humiliation and shame. In essence, humiliation versus dignity reflects a sentiment of local communities that have suffered at the hands of the regime. This is how al-Jawlani narrated the rule of the HTS: "O world, know that the people have chosen between living a life of humiliation and shame under the rule of the criminal regime, or living a life of dignity and honor after the rule of Islam and the revolution. And they have chosen[315]."

Al-Jawlani also seems to use Islamist or revolutionary discourse according to the audience and what they want to hear. The national revolutionary discourse is more likely to be aimed at the wider local communities. In such cases, the "us versus them" discourse stands for the Syrian revolution that represents dignity, justice, liberation, resilience, and a future-oriented perspective for rebuilding Syria versus the criminal regime that represents humiliation and foreign interests of Russia and Iran[316].

Similarly, the national revolutionary discourse is used to reach out to non-Sunni local communities, particularly the Druze community in Idlib. This is not to ignore that the national revolutionary element has somehow softened the group's hostile narrative toward minorities as it balanced, to an extent, the group's current glamorizing of Sunni identity and its former glorification of sectarianism as a main source of conflict and driver of revenge. Denouncing sectarianism, endorsing equality

[314] See Al-Jawlani's interview with Martin Smith, *ibid*.
[315] "Kalima Mar'iyya li'l-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' bi-Unwan 'Lan Nusalih'" [Video Speech by Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' Titled 'We Will Not Reconcile'], *ibid*., 1:15–2:00.
[316] "Kalima bi-Munasabat Dhikra al-Thawra al-Thaniyya 'Ashara" [Speech on the Occasion of the Twelfth Anniversary of the Revolution], *ibid*., 0:00–0:45. See Appendix (B2.1.)

between different sects, and embracing anti-regime pro-revolution inclusiveness that transcends sectarian boundaries by the group's leader stand out as evidence of norm entrepreneurship. When visiting a Druze locality in Idlib, al-Jawlani sought to unload the past baggage by denying links to former Jihadist crimes there and promoting inclusive national revolutionary discourse[317]. It is important to note here that this does not mean that the HTS completely reversed its practices and violations against minorities, which will be elaborated on in the second section below.

Nevertheless, the pure Jihadist tone, akin to the times of al-Nusra, is still evident when speeches are aimed at the group's fighters. The notion of the "spark of Jihad", the frequent emphasis on the "Ummah", the glorification of *Mujahideen* as heroic warriors and war as a holy practice to revive the glory of Islam all mirror the old speeches of al-Jawlani as al-Nusra's leader or a speech of a Jihadist leader elsewhere. This is major evidence that much of the group's fighters still hold onto extremist worldviews, on one hand, and that the group's narrative expanded to include new elements without unloading its former Jihadist ones that contradict the new ones, on the other[318].

Taking control of Damascus and establishing the rule of Islam is promoted as the ultimate objective by al-Jawlani when speaking to the group's fighters as it seems to remain one of the main motivations of the fighters and a reason why that drives them to maintain their commitment and loyalty to the group. It is promoted by al-Jawlani as a theory of victory that is not only possible but inevitable, yet requires patience, dedication, and preparation amid hardships. In this sense, the Taliban is portrayed as a model group that managed to achieve this "victory" which also suggests continuity in terms of the group's connection to the wider Islamist context[319].

While preserving his Jihadist tone regarding war and fighting, al-Jawlani sought to alter the Islamist perception vis-à-vis enforcing Sharia. Challenging the obviously present Islamist perception within

[317] "Tadshin Mashru' Bi'r Miah li-Taghziyat 'Iddat Qura fi Jabal al-Summaq bi-Rif #Idlib" [Inauguration of a Water Well Project to Supply Several Villages in Jabal al-Summaq in the Countryside of Idlib], *Amjad Media*, 2:45-5:10, 10 June 2022, (Access: 27 April 2024). See Appendix (B2.2.)
[318] "Takrim al-Awa'il fi Dawrat Qiyadat al-Kata'ib bi-Hudur Qiyadat Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham" [Honoring the Top Graduates of the Battalion Leadership Course in the Presence of the Leadership of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham], *Amjad Media*, 7:00-10:50, 4 February 2022 (Access: 27 April 2024). See Appendix (B2.3.)
[319] "Takhrij Dawrat li'l-Quwat al-Khassa bi-Hudur Qiyadat Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham" [Graduation of a Special Forces Course in the Presence of the Leadership of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham], *Amjad Media*, 5:30-8:50, 27 August 2021, (Access: 26 April 2024). See Appendix (B2.4.)

the group regarding Sharia and the relevant brutal punishments of stoning, amputation or whipping, al-Jawlani has maintained the same position of not imposing brutal punishments on locals, yet minimizing the significance of these punishments within the broader context of Sharia without denying their existence[320].

3.2.3 Model and Strategic Planning

By promoting Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's ruling manner as a rational act based on strategic planning in all aspects of life from security to services, portraying the HTS and its associated governance bodies as a representative of the Syrian Revolution, promising a new future vision that represents responsibility, renewal, and correction without giving up on the ultimate objective of overthrowing the regime; al-Jawlani propagates the HTS and its rule as a model for Syria[321].

The emphasis on learning from past experiences, controlling emotional drives and reactions, and developing planning and strategies reflects the element of rationality the group seeks to label itself with. Al-Jawlani expressed this tendency by the following saying: "Today, we speak after 12 years since the beginning of the revolution. Therefore, people must have learned a lot, and we have shifted from a state of emotional reactions to a state of planning, [and] strategies[322]."

The model is promoted as the primary representative of the Syrian Revolution and the primary representative of the Sunni people in Syria. This model is frequently called "al-Muharrar" [the liberated], composed of all actors within the HTS-controlled areas including the armed force, the governance bodies, and society. This showcases a self-identification that is no longer merely restricted to an armed group, rather HTS leadership propagates itself as a combination of the armed

[320] "New video message from Hay'at Taḥrīr al-Shām: 'Visit of the Commanders To Its Mujāhidīn Sons On a Blessed 'Īd al-Fiṭr'", *Jihadology*, 26 May 2020 (Access: 1 February 2024). See Appendix (B2.5.)
[321] "Kalima bi-Munasabat Dhikra al-Thawra al-Thaniyya 'Ashara" [Speech on the Occasion of the Twelfth Anniversary of the Revolution], *ibid*., 3:27-4:15. See Appendix (B3.1.)
[322] "Liqaa al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' ma'a Wujaha' al-Muhajirin li-Hadith 'an Khuturat al-Taqarub ma'a al-Nizam al-Mujrim" [Meeting of Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' with the Notables of the Displaced to Discuss the Danger of Rapprochement with the Criminal Regime], *Amjad Media*, 16:25-16:55, 11 January 2023 (Access: 26 April 2024).

group, governance body, and a social movement,-which will be discussed below in detail in the integration theme below[323].

This model is propagated as the best one in Syria in comparison with areas controlled by the "Syrian Democratic Forces" (SDF) and areas controlled by the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) of the opposition. Resilience against challenges, independence against foreign dictations, and self-sufficiency amid a lack of support and resources are the characteristics attributed to the group or the model in its narrative[324].

The HTS propagates that its so-called model has turned into the center of attention for different media outlets worldwide. Defining this model as a state-building process that is viewed as impressive and surprising for foreign visitors, the HTS leader expresses how the group is making efforts to attract positive recognition at local, regional, and international levels. Therefore, the model promoted serves as a primary pillar for the group's desire to move away from negative recognition to acquire a positive one. This is how al-Jawlani explains the so-called "attention":

> "The liberated areas are being visited by almost all major media outlets in the world... There are entities working to market the liberated areas correctly abroad and among all important parties locally, internationally, and regionally. But let's, my brothers, focus on local production... All the specialized organizations coming from abroad, which know how states and institutions are established and the difficulty of this matter, are all surprised and impressed that there is an operating project[325]."

This narrative theme primarily reflects HTS's efforts to attain external positive recognition and consolidate its so-called local legitimacy. One can argue that the de-escalation of the conflict, along with HTS's success in securing territorial control, and assuming governance duties played a significant role in the emergence of this narrative theme.

[323] "Mu'ayidat al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' li-Ahali wa Wujaha' Mintaqat Idlib" [Leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani's Greetings to the People and Notables of the Idlib Region], *ibid.*, 40:52-42:19. See Appendix (B3.2.)
[324] *ibid*., 10:10-10:50. See Appendix (B3.3.)
[325] *ibid*., 31:20-35:00.

3.2.4 Fighting and Building

While al-Nusra's narrative was overwhelmingly devoted to war and fighting, the narrative of HTS promotes war and governance as the highest level of achieving maturity. The fact that the HTS has managed to establish a governance body along with its armed forces is propagated in the group's narrative as an exceptional achievement that represents "a golden age". This notion of fighting and building at the same time is also promoted as a divine blessing and duty to be carried on[326].

Building and enhancing the institutional capacity of different governance bodies in different aspects of services is not only deemed significant for the areas controlled by the HTS in Northwestern Syria, but also for the post-regime era the group has long envisioned. This narrative, along with reflecting the group's desire for a radical status quo, serves to justify its investments in governance over war as the March 2020 ceasefire brokered by Türkiye and Russia has imposed a frozen conflict dynamic in Syria[327].

The primary reason for the HTS to justify its investments in governance over war is the sentiment among the forcibly displaced communities who still hold onto the notion of returning to their places of origin in a post-regime era. Therefore, governance and services are promoted as a means of the struggle against the regime while the ultimate objective remains to overthrow the regime and facilitate the return of forcibly displaced millions of people in Northwestern Syria. Governance and services are also propagated as a reflection of the group's valuing of people over territorial control to justify the objective reality of its inability to expand its territorial control at the expense of the regime[328].

Thus, the objective of radical change in the status quo manifested in the notion of fighting and overthrowing the regime remains central in the group's narrative despite its investment and marketing of its governance efforts. During the meeting of al-Jawlani and the head of the HTS-

[326] "Mu'ayidat Qiyadat al-Muharrar li'l-Wujaha' wa al-Kawadir" [Greetings from the Leadership of the Liberated to the Notables and Cadres], *Amjad Media*, 0:00-1:34, 27 April 2023 (Access: 26 April 2024). See Appendix (B4.1.)
[327] "Mu'ayidat al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' li-Ahali wa Wujaha' Mintaqat Idlib" [Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani's' Greetings to the People and Notables of the Idlib Region], *ibid*., 15:30-16:15. See Appendix (B4.2.)
[328] "Bi-Hudur al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' Iftitah Tariq Halab - Bab al-Hawa" [In the Presence of Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' the Opening of Aleppo - Bab al-Hawa Road], *Amjad Media*, 11:45-12:50, 8 January 2022 (Access: 26 April 2024). See Appendix (B4.3.)

associated “Salvation government”, the administrative-civil wing of HTS, with local notables, the former said that “we are ready for battle at any time, by the will of the God, whether in attack or defense. By the will of the God, there will be an attack [on the regime]. We will not wait for the regime to attack us... The decision is made, but we await the appropriate time[329].” In sum, this narrative theme communicates HTS’s objective of being a game changer in Syria and communicates its strategy to sponsor and supervise governance in Northwestern Syria.

3.2.5 Integration

While al-Nusra’s narrative had devoted a great significance to solidarity with local communities and with foreign fighters, the HTS has transformed the solidarity theme into integration, i.e. integrating the armed group into the local community. While such integration is portrayed as a source of strength that makes socially embedded groups undefeatable, it points out the group’s desire to transform into an armed group and a social movement at the same time. This is how al-Jawlani addressed injured soldiers: “The greatest source of strength for the revolution lies in the societal and popular integration with the military forces. This, my brothers, is an immense power that no state in the world can confront if built correctly, strongly, and agreed upon clear, noble, and transparent goals[330].”

The notion of “the Syrian revolution” is used in line with the group’s desire to get embedded in the local fabric as a source of local legitimacy. By defining themselves as sons, leaders, and soldiers of the revolution who have unwavering loyalty to the objective of overthrowing the regime, the group seeks to craft an image of a socially embedded armed group and a representative of the social demands and political aspirations[331].

[329] “Liqaa al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' wa Riasat Hukumat al-Inqadh ma'a Wujaha' al-Manatiq al-Muharrara” [Meeting of Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' and the Presidency of the Salvation Government with the Notables of the Freed Areas], *Amjad Media*, 26:20-27:07, 12 January 2023 (Access: 30 April 2024).
[330] “Hafl Mu'ayidah li'l-Ikhwa Musabi al-Ma'arek” [Event of Greeting the Brothers Wounded in Battle], *Amjad Media*, 3:25-3:40, 22 April 2023 (Access: 30 April 2024).
[331] “Kalima Mar'iyya li'l-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' bi-Unwan 'Lan Nusalih'” [Video Speech by Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' Titled 'We Will Not Reconcile'], *ibid*., 2:25–3:05. See Appendix (B5.1.)

As the group promotes the integration of the HTS, as an armed group, into society as a source of strength, this notion of integration is also used to imply interdependence between the armed group and the local community and thus common destiny. Al-Jawlani stated that they "focus more on institutional [capacity] building and the integration between the civilian and military sectors", because they "are an integral society, and the enemy does not distinguish between civilians and military[332]."

The notion of the "integral society" and the emphasis on social embeddedness did not reverse the group's glorification of its fighters who are still labeled as holy warriors, protectors of the HTS-controlled areas, and the providers of security for the governance-building process. The glorification of fighters is not surprising as the HTS is an armed group in essence, however, this glorification might also be aimed at justifying the salary advantages of fighters in comparison to the employees across the service sectors[333].

3.2.6 Politics and Political Solution

While al-Nusra demonized all the international initiatives seeking to facilitate a political solution to the Syrian conflict as attempts to revive the regime or instate a pro-West secular political regime and dismantle jihad in Syria, the HTS holds into the position of rejecting a political solution, however, justifying its position on its alleged commitment to the Syrian revolution and the fact that international and regional actors involved in the Syrian conflict are of contradicting interests making it very unlikely to reach a political solution to the ongoing stalemate. In this context, al-Jawlani endures to endorse a "military solution" in line with the group's zero-sum objective of a radical change in the status quo[334].

[332] "Hafl Mu'ayidah li'l-Ikhwa Musabi al-Ma'arek" [Event of Greeting the Brothers Wounded in Battle], *ibid*., 4:10-5:10.
[333] *ibid.*, 10:30-11:45. See Appendix (B5.2.)
[334] "Hafl Mu'ayidah li'l-Ikhwa Musabi al-Ma'arek" [Event of Greeting the Brothers Wounded in Battle], *ibid*., 5:10-5:55. See Appendix (B6.1.)

In this context, the potential Turkish negotiation with the regime is rejected as a threat to the objectives of the Syrian revolution. The remarkable usage of the notion of the Syrian revolution is also used to appeal to the wider local communities that have both strong emotional attachment to the Syrian revolution and positive sentiment toward Turkiye as an old supporter of the Syrian opposition. This is how al-Jawlani puts it: "The blessed Syrian revolution faces a new challenge in its ongoing struggle against the criminal regime and its allies. The talks between the criminal regime and its Russian ally with the Turkish side constitute a dangerous deviation that undermines the goals of the Syrian revolution[335]." This reflects the group's threat perception of a potential political or security settlement.

Projecting a strong image of the HTS group as an independent entity willing and capable of launching a war against the regime and achieving victory serves as a reason why not to submit to political settlements in its narrative. The emphasis on the objective of overthrowing the regime and the return of the forcibly displaced persons to their places of origin are also used to mobilize social support for the group's position[336]. Political solutions and partial settlements are perceived as past lessons. The Russian-brokered settlements in places like Daraa, Homs, and Gouhta which either reinstalled the regime's control or strengthened its leverage are used as lessons and reasons why the group rejects similar settlements in Northwestern Syria. The failure of former Geneva-based attempts to produce a political solution, which is labeled as dangerous, is used as an indication that an internationally orchestrated political solution is realistically not possible[337].

While the group endures to reject political solutions, they are no longer framed as an act of conspiracy. Rather, the pragmatic understanding of politics seems to be central to the group's perception of the strategic environment. By recognizing the different interests of different states involved in the Syrian conflict and saying that the group might have common and divergent interests with different parties, the group attempts to project itself as a rational actor capable of reading the strategic environment and acting accordingly. This is how al-Jawlani expressed his pragmatic understanding of politics:

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[335] "Kalima Mar'iyya li'l-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' bi-Unwan 'Lan Nusalih'" [Video Speech by Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' Titled 'We Will Not Reconcile'], *ibid*., 0:00-1:15.
[336] "Liqaa al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' ma'a Wujaha' al-Muhajirin li-Hadith 'an Khuturat al-Taqarub ma'a al-Nizam al-Mujrim" [Meeting of Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' with the Notables of the Displaced to Discuss the Danger of Rapprochement with the Criminal Regime], *ibid*., 21:00-21:44. See Appendix (B6.2.)
[337] *ibid*., 20:30-24:30. See Appendix (B6.3.)

> "Politics is not driven by emotions; countries do not liberate a nation for the sake of emotions because the ruler of that nation is killing its people and so on. In the realm of politics, this does not exist. There are interests that converge with each other. Perhaps there are points where we agree with some countries at times, and perhaps there are disagreements with the same party with whom we agree on certain points."[338]

The Syrian political opposition is labeled by al-Jawlani as lacking the capacity to be the legitimate representative of Syria in general and the anti-regime camp in particular. Nevertheless, the HTS has softened its tone toward the political opposition - as it used to label them as agents of the West during al-Nusra's period - criticizing the Syrian political opposition on the ground that it does not have leverage on the ground. Apparently, al-Jawlani takes advantage of the already existing negative sentiment toward the political opposition because of their existence in exile and thus their isolation from local communities[339].

3.2.7 Unity

The ideal of unity has always –as seen in the second chapter– been a central matter of the debate among armed groups across the spectrum in Syria and had driven the establishment of dozens of alliances and mutual operation "rooms", yet much of these alliances were unsustainable where factional disputes prevailed and hindered the evolution of a unified armed opposition against the regime. The fact that factional disputes have constituted a dilemma for the armed opposition in terms of its struggle against the regime and in terms of providing services and establishing governance has been used by al-Jawlani to emphasize the need for a unified authority to administer the areas out of the control of the regime and thus legitimize the HTS's strategy to monopolize power including its actions of dismantling and swallowing other factions[340].

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[338] "Liqaa al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' wa Riasat Hukumat al-Inqadh ma'a Wujaha' al-Manatiq al-Muharrara" [Meeting of Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' and the Presidency of the Salvation Government with the Notables of the Freed Areas], *ibid*., 6:05-7:50.

[339] "Liqaa al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' ma'a Wujaha' al-Muhajirin li-Hadith 'an Khuturat al-Taqarub ma'a al-Nizam al-Mujrim" [Meeting of Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' with the Notables of the Displaced to Discuss the Danger of Rapprochement with the Criminal Regime], *ibid*., 26:30-27:20.

[340] "Mu'ayidat al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' li-Ahali wa Wujaha' Mintaqat Idlib" [Leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani's Greetings to the People and Notables of the Idlib Region], *ibid*., 17:15-19:20. See Appendix (B7.1.)

Unity is endorsed as a necessity to ensure the survival of the Syrian revolution and achieve the objective of overthrowing the regime. In al-Jawlani's words, "continuing the revolution and fulfilling its duties to achieve its objectives requires uniting the efforts and achieving reunion[341]." The ideal of unity is promoted as it serves the HTS's desire to consolidate its power and evolve as the main and only armed umbrella of the anti-regime bloc. Emphasizing the notions of one leadership and one strategy reflects the group's desire to expand its control to areas controlled by the Syrian National Army (SNA), a strategy to be discussed in detail in the strategies section below. In this context, al-Jawlani stated the following views: "Our stance must be clear. All revolutionary forces should unite under one leadership with a single plan and strategy, whether in defense, offense, or even in building institutions within the liberated areas[342]."

The ideal of unity is also promoted as a primary necessity to confront the perceived threats and challenges, particularly a potential political settlement with the regime. This how al-Jawlani explained unity: "Strong positions sometimes demand a price and the price of saying we refuse to reconcile requires being prepared for it. Our strength should be built in the right way, well-knit together, and our word should be unified[343]." Thus, unity is promoted as a necessity for survival and continuation of the armed struggle against the regime. In parallel with that, unity is also promoted as crucial for providing services and achieving economic recovery. The absence of unity is labeled as an existential threat that hinders any process of recovery[344].

3.2.8 Sacrifice

Sacrifice remains one of the critical themes of the HTS narrative suggesting continuity over change. Sacrifice is glorified as a source of strength and as a primary driver of the group's gains, and fighters are praised for their sacrifices that secured the territorial control of the group. Fighters, in

[341] "Bi-Hudur al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' Iftitah Tariq Halab - Bab al-Hawa" [In the Presence of Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' the Opening of Aleppo - Bab al-Hawa Road], *ibid*., 2:37-3:27.
[342] "Liqaa al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' ma'a Wujaha' al-Muhajirin li-Hadith 'an Khuturat al-Taqarub ma'a al-Nizam al-Mujrim [Meeting of Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' with the Notables of the Displaced to Discuss the Danger of Rapprochement with the Criminal Regime], *ibid*., 18:18-18:37.
[343] "Liqaa al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' wa Riasat Hukumat al-Inqadh ma'a Wujaha' al-Manatiq al-Muharrara" [Meeting of Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' and the Presidency of the Salvation Government with the Notables of the Freed Areas], *ibid*., 23:22-24:12.
[344] "Bi-Hudur al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' Iftitah Tariq Halab - Bab al-Hawa" [In the Presence of Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' the Opening of Aleppo - Bab al-Hawa Road], *ibid*., 6:40-9:00. See Appendix (B7.2.).

this narrative, are recognized, privileged, and appreciated for their sacrifice. During his meeting with injured fighters, al-Jawlani addressed them with the following words:

> "Every student in his university owes you and your sacrifices, as they have dedicated themselves to study. Every person praying in the mosque owes you. Every worker in his factory, every farmer in his field, every worker in any area of the liberated land -all who walk on the land of the liberated, safe and secure, owe it to God, and then to your sacrifices[345]."

Sacrifice is glorified as a key trait of holy warriors, the *Mujahideen*, which differentiates them from conventional army soldiers and renders them superior to their enemies. The "spirit of sacrifice" is perceived as an Islamic ideal and a key condition for potential recruits and thus a key element of the military doctrine of the group. This so-called "spirit of sacrifice", in the narrative, is a product of individual desire and encouragement, and can only be granted voluntarily as an alternative to the traditional military practice of compulsory recruitment which is deemed to lack the mentioned element of sacrifice[346].

Furthermore, sacrifice is perceived as a primary factor shaping the group's theory of victory. The ability to "sacrifice and redemption" is portrayed as a defining factor in determining the fate of battles and who achieves victory against objective odds. The notion of victory or death is also promoted within the context of holy sacrifice, "martyrdom in the path of God", reflecting the group's zero-sum understanding of the conflict[347]. As the logic of sacrifice drives one of the most dangerous tactics of Jihadist groups, suicide attacks, the group endures to endorse them as "honorable" means of war. Suicide attacks are justified, in the group's narrative, as long as they are used against the perceived enemies and as a means rather than an end. In his interview with Martin Smith, al-Jawlani defended the group's deployment of suicidal attacks, despite already ceasing to carry out such attacks[348].

What's more, sacrifice is glamorized as a key requirement to preserve territorial control. During his meeting with locals from Southern Idlib to the north of the regime-controlled areas, al-Jawlani

[345] "Hafl Mu'ayidah li'l-Ikhwa Musabi al-Ma'arek" [Event of Greeting the Brothers Wounded in Battle], *ibid*., 2:00-2:40.
[346] "Mu'ayidat Qiyadat al-Muharrar li'l-Wujaha' wa al-Kawadir" [Greetings from the Leadership of the Liberated to the Notables and Cadres], Ibid, 16:20-17:30. See Appendix (B8.1.)
[347] "Al-Jawlani: Suriya fi Harb Tahrir wa Istiqlal" [al-Jawlani: Syria in a War of Liberation and Independence], *ibid*. See Appendix (B8.2.)
[348] "Abu Mohammad al-Jolani Military Leader, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham", *ibid*. See Appendix (B8.3.)

stated that "staying and clinging to the land truly requires sacrifice" and then asked: "without sacrifice, how can we hold onto our land?"[349]. Lastly, sacrifice is also promoted as a source of confidence to face challenges and expand territorial control. Along with the fact that the HTS possesses territorial control and institutional capacity, this notion of self-confidence stemming from sacrifice is used to suggest that the group is capable of expanding its territorial control at the expense of the regime in the future[350].

The narrative of HTS, as observed throughout this section, expresses the key element of its worldview, the lenses through which the group perceives the strategic environment and the actors involved. The narrative explains how the transformation of the HTS has been culturally processed and how the codes of the Jihadist worldview and the newly included national codes coexist and form a complex hybrid narrative. In comparison with al-Nusra's period, the narrative of HTS was localized and nationalized mirroring its transformation, yet without completely unloading old narrative elements such as sacrifice, the glorification of violence, and most importantly its rejection of political solutions.

3.3 Strategies

The strategic narrative has been interconnected with strategies driving and/or justifying them, lending meaning to actions, and culturally processing the concrete practices of the HTS's transformation. The strategies are the manifestation of HTS's transformation on the ground in terms of the way it secured territorial control, eliminated its rivals, governed the population and sought local legitimacy through providing services, and reshaped its insurgent tactics in response to the constraints of the strategic environment. By examining the HTS's strategies to achieve a monopoly of violence, provide and supervise services, and reshape its insurgent tactics, this section explores how the HTS has transformed into a hybrid insurgency challenging the traditional assumption of the binary division between state and non-state actorness.

[349] "Talbiyat al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' li-Da'wat al-Ahali fi Mintaqat Ariha wa Jabal al-Zawiya" [Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' Responds to the Invitation of the People in the Area of Ariha and Jabal al-Zawiya]", *Amjad Media*, 2:20-3:49, 26 March 2022 (Access: 30 April 2024).
[350] "Liqaa al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' wa Riasat Hukumat al-Inqadh ma'a Wujaha' al-Manatiq al-Muharrara" [Meeting of Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' and the Presidency of the Salvation Government with the Notables of the Freed Areas], *ibid*., 9:18-10:35. See Appendix (B8.4.)

3.3.1 Persuasion and Coercion to Enforce its Hegemony

Al-Nusra, the predecessor of the HTS, had relied on its localization strategy to build extensive relations with other Islamist armed groups, particularly Ahrar al-Sham (AaS), to root itself in the Syrian setting given the challenges of a potential international military campaign against the group following its designation as a terrorist organization and the establishment of the international coalition to defeat the ISIS, and the rise of the latter, which viciously fought to dominate the Jihadist orbit in Syria. Thus, al-Nusra was only hostile toward the Western-backed opposition armed groups, the ISIS, and of course, the Assad regime and allied militias that constituted the near enemy in the group's logic. Following its formation in January 2017, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham became more self-assertive in seeking to impose its hegemony in Northwestern Syria through a strategy of persuasion and coercion. It can be said that this strategy has been implemented successfully against all rivals or enemies of the group, whether they are the national armed opposition groups or the Jihadist ones[351].

The formation of the HTS itself was a result of persuading other Islamist-dominated armed groups, Nour al-Din al-Zenki (NDZ), Jabhat Ansar al-Din, Liwa al-Haqq, Jaish al-Sunna, and a breakaway faction from AaS to merge under the umbrella of HTS, and thus submit to HTS's core-group's strengthening grip on the insurgency in Northwestern Syria. The mainstream leadership of AaS, despite defections to the HTS, refused to submit to the hegemony of its former ally in Idlib whereby the increasingly self-assertive HTS took a hostile position toward the AaS coercing the latter to withdraw from Idlib after fierce fighting in July 2017[352].

Although expelling the AaS, the largest opposition armed group at the time, marked a turning point for the HTS proving its military superiority, the process did not go without challenges. The NDZ defected from the HTS during the latter's fight with the AaS in July 2017 refusing to take place in the conflict and denouncing the HTS's actions against the AaS, thus becoming the HTS's next

[351] "Containing Transnational Jihadists in Syria's North West", International Crisis Group, 7 March 2023 (Access: 30 March 2024).
[352] "Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham Take Control of Syria's Idlib", *Aljazzera*, 23 July 2017 (Access: 12 April 2024).

target. In fact, the NDZ had already been discontent with the HTS in mid-2017 before even the explosion of the infighting with the AaS. HTS's assault on Faylaq al-Sham's Division 13 taking over its headquarters and its killing of the head of the Free Syrian Police were by no means endorsable for NDZ, which triggered speculations about the latter's intention to defect from the HTS early in June 2017. A couple of weeks after NDZ's ultimate defection from HTS, the latter started to crack down on the former by targeting its positions and using assassination and kidnapping as a means of intimidation[353].

The NDZ sought to counterbalance HTS's growing hegemony by establishing an alternative bloc. In February 2018, the NDZ and the AaS announced their merger under a new umbrella called the Jabhat Tahrir Suriya (JTS) which also managed to grant the support of another armed group, Suqour al-Sham, in its upcoming conflict with the HTS. It only took one day after the establishment of the JTS for clashes to erupt between the sides, unsurprisingly turning into an open fight with JTS escalating its tone announcing the aim of bringing al-Jawlani along with HTS's senior commanders to the 'revolutionary justice' for committing crimes and targeting the revolutionary factions from the inside, the objectives that would never come true[354].

After several failed attempts to reach a permanent ceasefire, the two sides reached an agreement in April 2018 stipulating immediate ceasefire, prisoners' release, removal of checkpoints, and ongoing discussions to reach a consensus on military, Judiciary, administrative, and political levels which remained ink on paper[355]. Later in August 2018, the JTS joined the newly established National Front for Liberation (NFL), a military formation composed of 11 armed groups[356] under the leadership of the Faylaq al-Sham, which was previously engaged in mediation between the JTS and the HTS[357].

[353] "Relations between Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham and Nour al-Din al-Zinki in 2017", The Carter Center, 7 November 2017 (Access: 1 May 2024).
[354] "Liberation Front Seeks to Hold al-Julani Accountable for Crimes Against Syrians", *Zaman Alwasl*, 24 February 2018 (Access: 5 May 2024). https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/33138.
[355] "'Liberation of Syria' and 'Tahrir al-Sham' Reached Premanent Ceasfire.. What its Conditions?", *Syria TV*, 24 April 2018, (Access: 5 May 2024).
[356] "11 Faseelan Yushakkilun 'al-Jabha al-Wataniyya lil-Tahrir' fi Idlib" [11 Factions form the 'National Front for Liberation' in Idlib], *Enebbaladi*, 29 May 2018 (Access: 5 May 2024),
[357]"'al-Jabha al-Wataniyya lil-Tahrir' Unwan Jadid li-Fasa'il Musallaha bi-Idlib" ['National Front for Liberation': A New Title for Armed Factions in Idlib], *Aljazeera*, 2 August 2018 (Access: 5 May 2024).

The new formation was a second attempt by the opposition armed groups to challenge HTS's growing dominance in Idlib and its surrounding areas, however, it did not deter the HTS from pursuing its objective to enforce its monopoly of violence. In January 2019, the HTS launched an attack on NDZ of the NFL, on several fronts leading to an open fight between HTS and NFL for 9 days in which the HTS gained the upper hand as it first defeated the NDZ[358], which broke away from the NFL and left Idlib, and then compelled the NFL, with AaS and Suqour al-Sham composing its backbone, to surrender most of its positions and recognize HTS's rule through its "Salvation Government"[359].

By taking advantage of the poor organizational structure and coordination among its rivals, the HTS managed to bring them gradually to heel, through persuasion or coercion. The NFL accepted HTS's hegemony by becoming part of the HTS-led al-Fateh al-Mubin operations room in late June 2019 and kept its compliance with the overall HTS military strategy, despite that it later joined the Syrian National Army (SNA) in October 2019[360].

Persuasion and coercion have also been used as a strategy to deal with the angry Jihadists who could not comply with al-Jawlani's pragmatic leadership. After the formation of the HTS in January 2017, Jihadists loyal to the AQ started to defect from the HTS, most notably, Sami al-Uraydi who helped al-Nusra (predecessor of HTS) to preserve its Jihadist legitimacy against the ISIS. Later in 2018, al-Uraydi would take part in establishing Hurras al-Din (HD) as AQ's new affiliate in Syria to compete with the HTS. The HD would turn into a Jihadist dilemma for the HTS prompting its leadership to use incentives and punishment to tame the Jihadist group until finally dismantling it in 2020[361].

Before dealing with the HD, HTS had to face the challenge posed by Jund al-Aqsa, the Jihadist organization that operated as an unofficial sub-unit of al-Nusra under the name of Sarayat al-Quds

[358] "'Zenki' Withdraws from all Areas of its Control Western Aleppo in Favor of 'Tahrir al-Sham'", *Syria TV*, 5 January 2019 (Access: 11 May 2024).
[359] Zouhir Al Shimale, "Syria's Idlib Province Seized by HTS Militants After Deal with Rebels", *Middle East Eye*, 10 January 2019 (Access: 5 May 2024).
[360] "SIG Announces Merger Between National Army & National Liberation Front", *Etilaf*, 4 October 2019 (Access: 5 May 2024).
[361] "Containing Transnational Jihadists in Syria's North West", *ibid.*

till October 2016 when it joined Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (HTS's brand between 2016 and 2017). As Jabhat Fateh al-Sham dismissed the Jund al-Aqsa right before the formation of the HTS in late January 2017, the infighting between the two groups was inevitable. The HTS used its favorite tactic to break down the Jund al-Aqsa, absorbing various sub-units of the groups into its ranks while pushing away the ones unwilling to submit to its grip. The remaining offshoot operated under the name of Liwa al-Aqsa as an ISIS-linked group initiating an open fight against the HTS and other insurgents in Northwestern Syria. In February 2017, Liwa al-Aqsa managed to capture several towns committing mass executions of captured fighters, however, the group could not stand a month before the HTS ultimately expelled it from Northwestern Syria to Raqqa province where it joined the ISIS[362].

In late 2017, the HTS started to arrest AQ's veterans including Sami al-Uraydi, yet releasing them after a short period of time to decrease tensions at a time when Jihadist ideologues, most notably Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi[363], were already very critical of HTS's pragmatic trajectory, its deviation from the *Manhaj* (the method or the way thinking), the Jihadist ideology[364]. At that point, Jihadists had already made up their minds to establish an alternative group, the Hurras al-Din (HD), that reorganized the Jihadist forces in parallel and rivalry with HTS. Having become a de-facto reality, the HD was monitored by the HTS which tolerated its presence as long as it complied with the rules, i.e. not taking initiatives solely or opposing its overarching strategies of the HTS. Thus, the HD was coerced to accept the HTS's military hegemony, monopoly of governance through its associated Salvation Government in Idlib, and its judiciary as legitimate means in disputes. These had appeared, among other sources, in the "Six Issues" written by Abu Abdullah al-Shami, who defended the HTS in its dispute with AQ loyalists[365].

Given that the notion of maintaining unity to fight against the regime was dominant in Idlib, the HTS dealt with the HD the same way AaS had dealt with al-Nusra during the initial phase of the

[362] Alaa Nassar *et al.*, "Search for the Dead Begins in Idlib After Islamic State-linked Brigade Leaves for Raqqa", *Syria Direct*, 22 February 2017 (Access: 1 May 2024).
[363] Aaron Y. Zelin, "Living Long Enough to See Yourself Become the Villain: The Case of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi", *Washington Institute*, 29 March 2017 (Access: 13 April 2024).
[364] Cole Bunzel, "Diluting Jihad: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi", *Jihadica* (Access: 14 April 2024).
[365] Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (IX)", *Aymennjawad*, 5 February 2019 (Access: 14 April 2024).

conflict, that is, tolerating and providing the HD with logistical support, particularly for frontline positions, as incentives to keep the group's maneuvers under control and utilizing its military capability against the regime. Thus, the HD enjoyed a window of maneuvers that enabled it to establish an operation room called "Wa Harid al-Mouminin" (And Incite the Believers) with other small Jihadist groups such as Jabhat Ansar al-Din (a breakaway faction from the HTS), Jamaat Ansar al-Islam (an Iraqi group that operated in Idlib)[366].

The status quo of containing the Hurras al-Din remained intact till the mid-2020 when it refused to comply with the Turkish-Russian brokered ceasefire in March 2020, accusing the HTS of conducting "acts of non-belief" by implicitly accepting the ceasefire. The HD established an operations room under the name of Fa-Ithbatu (So Be Steadfast) with other small Jihadist groups (Tansiqiyat al-Jihad, Liwa al-Muqatilin al-Ansar, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, and Jamaat Ansar al-Islam) in an attempt to delegitimize the HTS and challenge its authority. Meanwhile, the HD-led Jihadist alliance was growing and attracting more Jihadists on board. One of the HTS Jihadist allies, the Uzbek Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, shifted its allegiance from HTS to the HD's ally, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, overestimating their capacity to impose a change in the status quo.

The response of the HTS was intolerant. The HTS banned the conduct of any military operations by any party solely, declaring that only the HTS and the HTS-led "al-Fatah al-Mubin" operations room could carry out military actions, a measure that paved the way for banning the establishment of armed formations and dismantling the HD and its operations room in the mid-2020. All the odds were in favor of the HTS. First, the ceasefire meant that the HTS was no longer under imminent threat of a regime's military campaign and thus HD's military capacity was not very vital for the HTS on the frontline with the regime. Second, HD's weak organizational structure enabled the HTS to take over its headquarters and bases and arrest its leader, dismantling the group and its operations room within a few days[367]. In sum, the HTS ultimately managed to overcome the primary threat to its efforts in enforcing its hegemony.

[366] Zelin, *The Age of Political Jihadism,* 19.
[367] "Containing Transnational Jihadists in Syria's North West", *ibid*., 7 and 8.

Given its swift success in dismantling the Hurras al-Din in mid-2020, the HTS has become more self-assertive in applying the same coercive means, it previously applied on the HD, on the other Jihadists and remnants of HD, and its former affiliates to ensure its monopoly of violence. The breakaway groups from the HD, Saraya Abu Bakr al-Sadiq and Saraya Abdullah bin Omar Unais, were among the most prominent Jihadist groups dismantled by the HTS during 2020-2021. The two groups had broken away from the HD because of the division among HD leaders on whether to attack the HTS and Turkish forces or not, resulting in the establishment of the two groups which divided the labor whereby al-Sadiq group attacked the Turkish forces and Unais group attacked the HTS. Kataeb Khattab al-Shishani, a third group that had been part of the HD before, was also dismantled by the HTS after the former carried out attacks against Russian and Turkish forces responsible for guaranteeing the ceasefire[368].

By the end of 2021, the HTS had completed its mission of monopolizing violence and completely coercing Jihadists to submit to its conditions. Yet they fall into two categories. The first category includes the groups that challenged the HTS or its "Salvation Government", while the second category includes the groups who abided by the rules defined by the HTS, and thus recognized the latter's superiority and right to rule.

The first category is composed of groups such as Firqat al-Guraba, Junoud al-Sham, and Jundallah. Firqat al-Ghuraba, led by a French militant with a criminal record in France called Abu Omar Omsen, was dismantled and its leader was arrested for more than a year where he was coerced to agree to give up militancy, recruiting French fighters and inciting attacks on France, speaking to the media. The HTS dismantled Jihadist groups under varying pretexts. Junoud al-Sham, a Jihadist group led by Chechen Muslim al-Shishani, was accused of safeguarding criminals in its ranks and cooperating with a radical Jihadist group, Jundallah, and consequently coerced to be dismantled. The abovementioned Jundallah, led by the Azerbaijani Jihadist Abu Hanifa al-Adhari, was accused of the Ghulu [religious extremism] as well as covering criminals in their ranks. The HTS dismantled also this group and detained all of its members who underwent a so-called ideological

[368] *ibid*., 8 and 9.

rehabilitation to alter their extremist worldviews including Takfir, excommunicating Muslims, 20 out of 50 members were released after they were believed to have successfully rehabilitated[369].

The second category is composed of groups that submitted to HTS's rules, the most prominent group of which is the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). The TIP is an Uygur-led armed group that holds anti-China, anti-Russia, anti-Iran, and anti-Assad regime codes which were expressed by the group in the early phase of the Syrian conflict between 2012-2013. In an article published by the group in 2013, it stated that "if China has the right to support Bashar al-Assad in Syria, then we have the full rig to support our proud Muslim Syrian people[370]." Yet, the TIP's first actual participation in the Syrian conflict occurred in 2015 when it joined other armed groups including al-Nusra (the predecessor of HTS) in the offensive of Jisr al-Shughur, a city in Northwestern Idlib in April 2015, where the armed groups captured the city[371]. Since then, the TIP has begun to forge a strong bond with the HTS, proving –in time– its near-blind obedience to HTS's military strategies. The TIP has shared HTS's anti-ISIS position denouncing ISIS as illegitimate, joined the HTS in its battle against the JTS in 2018, and assisted HTS in its process of dismantling other Jihadist groups such as the aforementioned AQ affiliate HD and Jund al-Sham[372].

Publicly, the TIP has kept a low profile refraining from any public appearance until November 2021 when it organized its first public conference, with HTS's blessing, after acquiring the confidence as the group's original Afghanistan-based mother organization, "East Turkistan Islamic Movement – ETIM", was removed from the U.S. State Department's Terrorist Organizations' List. As reported, a spokesperson of the State Department said in December 2020 that the ETIM was removed from this list "because for more than a decade, there has been no credible evidence that ETIM continues to exist[373]". The TIP has remained untouched by the HTS since it has long

[369] *ibid*.. 9.
[370] Jacob Zenn "An Overview of Chinese Fighters and Anti-Chinese Militant Groups in Syria and Iraq", The Jamestown Foundation Global Research and Analysis, 10 October 2014 (Access: 25 April 2024).
[371] Bassem Mroue and Gerry Shih, "Chinese Jihadis' Rise in Syria Raises Concerns at Home", *Associated Press*, 22 April 2017 (Access: 15 April 2024).
[372] Khaled al-Khatib, "'Al-Hizb al-Islami al-Turkistani'... Halif Tahrir al-Sham al-Mufaddal wa Dhira'uha li-Tatwi' al-Munahidheen" ['The Turkistan Islamic Party'... Tahrir al-Sham's Preferred Ally and Its Arm for Subjugating Opponents], *Syria TV*, 26 November 2024 (Access: 31 May 2024).
[373] Asim Kashgarian, "Uighur Diaspora Hails Removal of ETIM From US Terror List", *Voice of America*, 25 December 2020 (Access: 31 May 2024).

distanced itself from other Jihadist groups allying itself with HTS and submitting to its hegemony in Idlib.

Lastly, Ansar al-Tawhid, a group formed of remnants of Liwa al-Aqsa, joined also the HTS-led al-Fateh al-Mubin operations room after the group was coerced to first distance itself from the HD back in May 2020, later select a new leader, and remain indifferent to the HTS's purging campaign against the group's hardliners. Other small foreign groups had to get integrated into the HTS such as the Moroccan Sham al-Islam, the Chechen groups of Jaysh al-*Muhajireen* wal-Ansar and Ajnad al-Qawqaz, the Tajik Jama'at al-Tajik, the Gulf-based Muhajiri Bilad al-Haramayn, the Iranian Harakat Muhajiri al-Sunna min Iran, and the Albanian Jama'a al-Alban. Other groups were organized under the HTS-led al-Fateh al-Mubin operations room such as the Uzbek Tawhid wal-Jihad along with other small groups[374].

The HTS delicately used its persuasion and coercion strategy to enforce its hegemony and subject all armed groups in Idlib and its surroundings to its authority by which it dealt with each group separately taking advantage of the poor organizational structure of its rivals and the fragile alliances. In short, the HTS managed to manipulate factional alliances and prevent the growth of any potentially rival bloc, let it be on the Jihadist or the Syrian opposition side.

3.3.2 Institutionalization and Governance

While the HTS, during the al-Nusra period, had leveraged its capacity to provide services through participation with other armed groups in governance activities seeking social acceptance that enables its localization efforts, it has been engaged in its state-building efforts since 2017 becoming a de-facto authority that built a hegemonic governance project under the name of Syrian Salvation Government (SSG). By performing the duties of the state such as providing services, issuing identity cards, building a judiciary, etc., the HTS has emerged as a 'hybrid' actor as the boundaries between state and non-state actors are quite blurred in Syria. Understanding the 'hybrid' nature of HTS's project requires challenging the traditional assumptions on the binary division between

[374] "Containing Transnational Jihadists in Syria's North West", *ibid*., 11.

Weberian state and non-state actorness. In their impressive work on Lebanon and Iraq, Lina Khatib and Renad Mansour argued that the very concept of the state and the assumed binary division between state and non-state "does not reflect more fluid on-the-ground realities[375]." This is the case in Syria where the HTS has increasingly claimed state principles including core territorial control, hegemonic administrative project, and influence over the inhabitant population. William Grant-Brook, a researcher in the field of conflict prevention and peacebuilding, explains how "Northwest Syria [HTS's governance] illustrates the shortcomings of our understandings about, and our overreliance on, the separateness of state and non-state, ignoring much of their shared nature[376]."

Building governance has been one of the core strategies of the HTS seeking to leverage it as a source of legitimacy in line with its narrative of 'model and strategic planning' as well as its narrative of 'fighting and building'. Formed in November 2017, the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) operated as an administrative-civil wing of the HTS, taking over all the administrative duties in the HTS-controlled areas. The installation of the SSG involved three main mechanisms: a) centralizing governance entities, b) giving rise to a new technocratic urban elite, and c) relying on third parties such as NGOs to carry out the responsibility of certain public services[377].

The HTS took advantage of the local frustration with factionalism and its negative impact on governance throughout the conflict. Urban elites including educated non-militant Islamists, academics, and political activists, who were united by a sense of resentment toward the Syrian opposition bodies such as the Syrian National Coalition and Syrian Interim Government (SIG) due to their exclusion of these elites, led the efforts to form the SSG backed by the HTS. Businessmen came on board to support the formation of SSG, motivated by their self-interest believing that unified governance would provide security and limit armed group's intervention in day-to-day governance[378].

[375] Renad Mansour and Lina Khatib, "Where is the 'State' in Iraq and Lebanon?", *Chatham House*, 21 April 2021 (Access: 31 May 2024).
[376] William Grant-Brook, "The State in Idlib: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Complexity Amid the Syrian Civil War", *Rebel Governance in the Middle East*, eds. Ibrahim Fraihat and Abdalhadi Alijla (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 76.
[377] Jerome Drevon and Patrick Haenni, "How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads: The Case of HTS, the Former AQ Franchise in Syria", European University Institute, January 2021 (Access: 31 March 2024). 5.
[378] *ibid*.

The supposed legitimacy of the SSG is based on the "General Syrian Conference" held in September 2017, sponsored by the "Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Free Idlib", and attended by approximately 50 figures of the urban elites[379]. This conference laid the ground for the establishment of the "General Shura Council" in March 2019 and the election of a new council in October 2021, in which the council has served as a parliament-like body supposedly holding the executive government accountable before its legislative power. Although the composition of the council was based on proportional representation categories inclusive of localities, displaced persons, tribes, syndicates etc., the election processes have been phony and favored those who are associated or close to the HTS[380]. Yet, it served the group to locally legitimize its new governance project in rivalry with the Northwestern Syria-based SIG that denounced the formation of an HTS-backed government as illegitimate, in the very initial phase in September 2017[381].

The SSG gradually imposed its monopoly of governance on factions and local councils in parallel with HTS's enforcement of its monopoly of violence in its controlled areas. Factions and local councils had to give up their governance role to the newly established SSG's "ministries" which ultimately consolidated its authority in various governance fields. For instance, the Ministry of Justice took over the courts run by factions along with the archives, however, they maintained the judicial staff to a large extent and kept the detainees imprisoned according to the already given sentences. Other ministries such as the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs have also assumed control of the trade register and the Department of the Camps and Displaced Persons respectively[382].

One of the crucial challenges faced by the SSG during its centralization process was the local councils. As they enjoyed a high level of autonomy by either being independent or keeping coordination with other factions, local councils resisted the SSG's strengthening grip over governance. Nevertheless, all of the councils will eventually get integrated into the SSG's Ministry

[379] "'Al-Mu'tamar al-Suri al-'Aam' Yuwajih 'al-Hukuma al-Mu'aqata' fi Idlib" ['The General Syrian Conference' Faces 'The Interim Government' in Idlib], *Enebbaladi*, 18 September 2017 (Access: 31 May 2024).
[380] Khaled al-Khatib, "Namudhaj Jadid li-'Baragmatiyyat al-Hay'a'.. Itlaq al-Nuskha al-Thaniyya li-Majlis al-Shura fi Idlib" [A New Model of 'HTS Pragmatism'.. Launching the Second Edition of the Shura Council in Idlib], *Syria TV*, 30 November 2021 (Access: 31 March 2024).
[381] "'al-Mu'tamar al-Suri al-'Aam' Yuwajih 'al-Hukuma al-Mu'aqata' fi Idlib" ['The General Syrian Conference' Faces 'The Interim Government' in Idlib], *ibid.*
[382] Drevon and Haenni, "How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads", 6.

of Local Administration and Services in three phases. First, the SSG directly brought local councils located in its strongholds, such as Harem, under its control or indirectly through supervising elections that designate these councils in other cases. Second, the SSG coerced the rest of the local councils such as Kafr Takharim and Jabal al-Zawiya, which were located in areas controlled by HTS's rivals of the NFL factions before their defeat to HTS in 2019, to submit to its authority following HTS's victory[383]. Third, the SSG dismantled all the local councils following the earthquake of February 2023 integrating all of them to a new local administration system composed of eight municipalities that operates under the Ministry of Local Administration and Services[384].

The centralization of governance does not mean that the SSG is fully in control of service provision, particularly when it comes to public sectors requiring large economic resources the SSG cannot afford. This is quite evident in the health and education sectors which the SSG outsourced to NGOs to relieve itself from the economic burden of fully running the two sectors. In the health sector, the SSG's role in service provision is limited while international NGOs along with their local partners are the actual runners of the health institutions in Idlib. For example, the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), a Syrian-American NGO that operates in nine countries including Syria where it undertakes a central role in the health sector, operates 37 medical facilities in Northern Syria, 28 of which are located in SSG-controlled territory[385]. With a number of 2500 service providers, the SAMS was able to serve more than 1.3 million beneficiaries in 2022, the majority of whom live in SSG-controlled areas[386]. This indicates the central role of NGOs in running the health sectors despite what al-Jawlani has propagated regarding the governance role of the SSG in the health sector where the latter lacks the experience and the resources to sponsor and run unilaterally.

In the education sector, NGOs also handle the responsibility of operating public schools as well as providing salaries for teachers and educational supplies for students as the SSG is incapable of allocating economic resources to fully run the education system[387]. The SSG's Ministry of

[383] *ibid*.
[384] "SSG Transfers Civil Administration Powers from Local Councils to New Centralised Municipalities", *The Syria Report*, 12 September 2023 (Access: 31 March 2024).
[385] *SAMS 2022 Annual Report*, Syrian American Medical Society, 24 November 2023 (Access: 31 March 2024).
[386] *ibid*., 26.
[387] Hala Haj Ali, "Ihtiyajat Jeel Ma Ba'd al-Harb... al-Fajawat al-Ta'limiyya fi Shamal Gharb Suriya Unmudhajan" [The Needs of the Post-War Generation... The case of the Educational Gaps in Northwest Syria], *Omran Center for Strategic Studies*, 30 December 2023 (Access: 31 March 2024), 26.

Education has assumed the role of a coordination body rather than the role of an actual ministry, whereby it carries out minimal duties confined to the restoration and maintenance of buildings[388] and relies on a network of NGOs to operate public schools[389]. Against this backdrop, the SSG's Ministry of Education has invested much in strict religious schools called "House of the Holy Revelation" where thousands of students are indoctrinated with an extremist interpretation of religion. The SSG has allocated a significant budget for sponsoring these strict schools to promote them as high-profile ones in comparison with their public counterparts and thus render them attractive for teachers and the local community. These schools often have better services and infrastructure, and payment for educational staff is higher than that of public schools[390].

On a macro level, the HTS's strategy in governance showcases a rationale based on pragmatic and ideological motivations. On one hand, HTS acted pragmatically in backing a civil administration composed less of fanatics seeking to Islamicize society and more of technocrats pursuing services-based local legitimacy, as well as in handing over almost entire sectors such as health to NGOs to elevate its financial burden. On the other hand, HTS maintained its commitment to localize its ideology through soft means such as the strict religious schools sponsored by the SSG. This reveals a complex co-optation meant to preserve the balance between pragmatic flexibility and ideological commitment as long as both serve HTS's mission of hegemony.

3.3.3 Challenging the Constraints of the Strategic Environment

The establishment of the Turkish observation posts in Idlib under the Sochi Agreement in 2017 paved the way for enforcing the 5 March 2020 ceasefire owing to the increasing Turkish presence in Northwestern Syria. The HTS has adjusted itself to the rules of the new status quo, however, endured to challenge the constraints of the strategic environment seeking to maximize its leverage in Northwestern Syria. The HTS attempted to expand into the Syrian National Army's (SNA) controlled areas between 2021 and 2023 and continued to use its guerrilla tactics against the Assad regime, most prominently raids.

[388] "Infughrafik li-A'mal Wizarat al-Tarbiyya wa al-Ta'lim Khilal Aam 2023" [Infographic of the Ministry of Education's Activities During 2023], *Syrian Salvation Government*, 1 December 2024 (Access: 31 May 2024).
[389] Drevon and Haenni, "How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads", *ibid*., 7.
[390] "Madaris 'Dar al-Wahi' Adat 'Tahrir al-Sham' li-'Jeel Shari' fi Idlib" ['Dar al-Wahi' Schools: Tahrir al-Sham's Tool for a 'Sharia Generation' in Idlib], *Enebbaladi*, 6 January 2024 (Access: 31 March 2024).

The HTS's narrative themes of 'unity', and 'model and strategic planning' were actively used to legitimize its strategy to expand its influence into SNA's controlled areas. The principle of establishing a unified military leadership and ending factionalism was used to lend acceptance to HTS's hostile strategy against opposition factions within the local community. Moreover, HTS's fighters continued to demonize SNA's factions labeling them as "Sahawah"[391] – despite that this narrative is no longer used by the HTS's leader– showcasing the enduring extremist code within the HTS's military wing.

In action, the HTS's expansion strategy was based on taking advantage of the poor structure of the SNA and the rivalry among its factions. In mid-2022, the HTS exploited the infighting between two SNA factions, the Levant Front and Ahrar al-Sham-Eastern Sector, in which the latter called for HTS's support as it lacked the capacity to confront the former. The HTS saw the infighting and the call for its intervention as a window of opportunity to advance its influence in the SNA-controlled areas, bringing in troops against the Levent Front, before withdrawing after negotiations and a reached agreement[392]. However, HTS's withdrawal was tactical. In October 2022, the HTS exploited another infighting among SNA factions, namely between the Levent Front on the one hand, and Sultan Sulaiman Shah along with al-Hamza Division, on the other. The HTS forged a pragmatic alliance with Sulaiman Shah and al-Hamza factions, which were isolated and feared being dismantled by the Levent Front, utilizing its relations with them to intervene in the infighting and thus set foot in the SNA-controlled areas[393].

The massive arrival of HTS troops had enabled it to take over Afrin city and move toward Azaz where its expansion was blocked due to the resistance and the pushback by the Levent Front and its allies during October 2022. Nevertheless, the HTS had managed it insert its "General Security Service" along with administrative units while demanding, during negotiations, the dismantling of the Syrian Interim Government and the expansion of its Syrian Salvation Government as a unified structure of governance in all of Northwestern Syria. While the odds seemed to be in favor of HTS,

[391] Anonymous observer's explanation to the author.
[392] Harun al-Aswad, "Syria's Rebel Divisions Laid Bare as HTS Takes Afrin Villages from Turkish-backed Groups", *Middle East Eye*, 23 June 2023 (Access: 31 March 2024).
[393] Khaled al-Jaraetli, "'Tahrir al-Sham'.. Hulm Idarat al-Shamal al-Suri" ['Tahrir al-Sham', The Dream of Administering Northern Syria], *Enebbaladi*, 23 October 2022, (Access: 31 March 2024).

the Turkish intervention prevented the HTS's takeover of Northwestern Syria[394] compelling HTS to switch its tactics. HTS began to support certain factions, such as the Ahrar al-Sham-Eastern Sector, Fiftieth Division, and remnants of Nour al-Din al-Zenki, which ultimately came under an umbrella alliance called Tajamu al-Shahbaa (TaS) in February 2023. While the TaS claimed to be part of the SNA, it acted as a local affiliate of HTS which sought to maximize its influence indirectly after it failed to directly assert its control[395]. By taking advantage of the poor structure of the SNA and internal rivalry, the TaS forged an alliance with its former enemy, the Levent Front, and another small faction in November 2023, which served its agenda to label itself as an SNA faction while it maintained proximity to the HTS[396]. However, such alliances were not recognized by SIG's defense Ministry which has taken considerable measures to counter the risk posed by HTS and its affiliates, ultimately compelling TaS to dismantle itself later in 2024[397].

Lastly, HTS's challenge of the strategic environments' constraints was not limited to its attempts to expand to SNA-controlled areas, it also utilized guerilla tactics to challenge the prospects of a new settlement as regional politics started to shift toward normalizing relations with the Assad regime in late 2021 reaching its peak in the aftermath of the February 2023 earthquake. This point will be further discussed in the following section.

[394] "HTS Halts Offensive in Northern Syria as Turkey Moves to End Inter-rebel Clashes", *The New Arab*, 19 October 2022 (Access: 31 March 2024).
[395] Muhammed Kurkos, "Suriya: Indimaj Fasa'il 'Iddat Mu'arida Shamal Halab Taht Musamma 'Tajamu' al-Shahbaa'" [Syria: The Merger of Several Opposition Factions in Northern Aleppo Under the Name 'Tajamu al-Shahbaa'], A*laraby*, 3 February 2023 (Access: 31 March 2024).
[396] Abdul Qader Muhammad, "Fasa'il fi 'al-Jaysh al-Watani' Tu'lin Tashkeel 'al-Quwa al-Muwahhada'" [Factions in 'The National Army' Announce the Formation of 'The Unified Force'], *Baladi News*, 5 November 2023 (Access: 31 March 2024).
[397] "Bidāyat Nihāyat Mashrūʿ 'al-Jawlani' bi-Ḥalab 'Tajamu al-Shahbaa' Yūḥallu Nafsahu wa Yulhaq Tashkīlātahu bi 'al-Jabhat al-Shāmiyyah'" [The beginning of the end of the project 'al-Jawlani' in Aleppo, 'Tajamu al-Shahbaa" dissolves itself and merges its formations with "Levent Front'], *Shaam Network*, 4 April 2023 (Access: 31 March 2024).

3.3.4 Hybrid Insurgency

Addressing the nature of HTS-style insurgency is a challenging task due to the increasingly blurred lines between insurgency and non-insurgency, i.e. transforming into a complex hybrid insurgency that continues to use insurgent tactics against the regime to a certain extent, while concurrently claiming some conventional army aspects and operationally countering other insurgent groups – by which it enforced monopoly of violence in the territory under its control as illustrated above. The narrative themes vis-à-vis rejecting a political solution, endorsing sacrifice, and promoting war and governance as two concurrent objectives communicate the group's complex insurgency style, that is, acting like an authoritarian government in areas under its control and using insurgent tactics outside its controlled territory.

In this sense, it can be observed that the HTS has also modified its insurgent tactics. The most significant modification is giving up suicide bombings, at least for now, which is not difficult to understand when considering the group's rebranding process, i.e. distancing itself from the AQ and claiming the national revolutionary brand. Nevertheless, new tactics were incorporated, too. The HTS began to develop a new means, that is, suicidal drones, aiming at boosting its military capability and potentially rendering itself advantageous in battle[398]. In this context, HTS is following an already popular technology innovation among violent non-state actors (VNSAs) in the Middle East, which has become a significant theme for security research[399].

HTS's insurgent attacks against the regime have not ceased to exist as well. HTS used the so-called 'special operations [raids]', rocket shells, and sniper attacks as means of assault against the regime. In 2022, the HTS claimed responsibility for multiple 'special operations' across the countrysides of Aleppo, Idlib, and Latakia where 90 regime soldiers were reportedly killed as well as for hundreds of sniper attacks reportedly targeting 320 of the regime's soldiers[400].

[398] Thaer Al-Mohammad, "Ḥarb Musayyirāt fi Samā' Idlib.. Shkl Jadid li-Mīdān al-Ma'rakah Shamāl Gharbi Suriya" [Drone Warfare in the Skies of Idlib.. A New Shape for the Battlefield in Northwest Syria], *Syria TV*, 30 December 2023 (Access: 31 March 2024).
[399] Yannick Veilleux-Lepage and Emil Archambault, "A Comparative Study of Non-State Violent Drone Use in the Middle East", International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 9 December 2022 (Access: 28 April 2024).
[400] "Military Wing", *Amjad Media*, 1 June 2023, (Access: 28 April 2024).

In respect to the use of kidnapping, while there is evidence that the HTS used kidnapping, particularly as a source of revenue[401], there were no incidents resembling the kidnapping of the U.N. peacekeepers or the Greek Orthodox nuns of Maaloula by its predecessor group, al-Nusra. This does not mean that the group has actually refrained from committing human rights violations, given that the HTS has confiscated hundreds of properties from religious minorities including Christians, Druze, and Shia, let alone forcibly converting the Druze populations in villages in Northern Idlib to Sunni Islam[402].

What is worthy of attention is HTS's establishment of prisons and its increasing use of detention and forced disappearance as a means of intimidation against its opponents, resembling – to an extent – the authoritarian style of the regime. In 2020, the HTS established the "General Security Service" that operated as a security and intelligence body responsible for enforcing regulations and running detention facilities and operations. Torture including handcuffing, blindfolding, dragging, hanging from the ceiling, and beating with cable or hosepipe is commonly used in HTS's prisons, particularly to force confessions. In addition, incidents of sexual violence and ill-treatment including the denial of adequate food and medical care were also reported[403]. Moreover, violations that amount to war crimes are documented by the UN Human Rights Council. Men, women, and children are sentenced to death by courts operating under the HTS control for reportedly committing murder, adultery, or rape, and even for drug use or prostitution – these convictions are claimed to be based on Sharia[404], revealing the continuity of extremist aspects despite the transformation of the group.

Finally, the HTS started to claim aspects that are traditionally exclusive to conventional armies. Aiming at projecting a strong image and promoting itself as an actor of a strategic vision, the HTS established a 'Military Academy', 'Military Training Department', 'Conscription Departments', and a 'Center for Studies and Military Planning'[405]. While the group regularly propagates its

[401] "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019", U.S Department of State, 24 June 2020 (Access: 28 April 2024), 287.
[402] Zelin, *The Age of Political Jihadism*, 36.
[403] "'No End in Sight': Torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020-2023", The United Nations Human Rights Council, 10 July 2023 (Access: 29 March 2024), 23-25.
[404] *ibid*.
[405] "Military Wing", *ibid*.

military training courses[406], little information is available on the nature of these institutions which remain clandestine rendering it difficult to assess their real weight and nature.

3.4 Conclusion

HTS's narrative and strategies are interconnected by which the former drives or legitimizes the latter as assumed. The narrative illustrates aspects of HTS's way of thinking in its post-AQ-era where it amended its Jihadist ideology stretching itself to adopt national political codes, most prominently the notion of the Syrian revolution. This dynamic challenged and diluted the old objective of establishing an 'Islamic Emirate', promoted a new identity composed of two contradictory elements: the Syrian revolutionary nationalism and Salafi Jihadism, and reconstructed the 'us' and 'them' divisions accordingly. The strategies reveal the HTS's appetite, if not objective, for state-building on all levels: territorial control, monopoly of violence, and monopoly of governance; and its ability to pursue various means to make concrete progress. Yet, HTS's enduring use of insurgent tactics against the perceived enemy, the Assad regime, showcases its perception of the current frozen conflict status as temporary despite abiding by its overall rules. The combination of the narrative and strategies reveals key characteristics of the HTS in its post-AQ era. These are the reinterpreting the old historical events as strategic culture sources, the hybrid identity which is an outcome of the flexibility and ability to adapt in response to the strategic environment, and the strategic patience in dealing with challenges and constraints or pursuing its objectives in the middle or long term.

The first characteristic, reinterpreting old historical experiences as sources of strategic culture, that is, using old historical events such as the Umayyad Empire as a source of national glory while concurrently preserving the use of old historical eras such as the Roman or Persian Empires to refer to the perceived historical enemies. Moreover, contemporary modern experiences became more relevant as strategic cultural sources than old ones. While this can be attributed partly to HTS's unlocking of its extremist past to seek international acceptance, it is also a resorting to contemporary events that are more relevant to the group such as the Taliban's experience in

[406] "'Tahrir al-Sham' Tukharrij Qadat Majmu'at li'l-Alwiyah al-'Askariyya" ['Tahrir al-Sham' Graduates Group Leaders for the Military Brigades], *Enabbaladi*, 20 December 2021 (Access: 30 March 2024).

Afghanistan. This showcases that the decreasing relevance of old historical events is not merely to project an acceptable ideological image, but also to replace them with contemporary events that also reflect extremism of different kinds, yet relevant to the group's strategic culture in terms of imitation and new identity.

Second, it is HTS's hybrid identity. It was produced thanks to its strategic cultural flexibility by adopting cultural codes of the local environment. This identity is composed of its traditional Jihadist of al-Nusra's period, the Pan-Islamist identity, and the national revolutionary nationalism crafting a new hybrid definition of 'us'. HTS narrates different 'them' as well, moving beyond the absolute categorization of friends and enemies in favor of recognizing the complex nature of states and their interests. Yet, the HTS endures to hold onto by-default Jihadist codes of sacrifice, 'Sahawah', 'Rafida', 'enemies of God', etc. reflecting its complex way of thinking, a worldview shaped by its historical Jihadist baggage and its transformation in Syria.

Third, the strategic patience in dealing with challenges, threats, and constraints posed by the strategic environment and pursuing its objectives in the middle term such as the monopoly of violence and governance whereby the HTS gradually swallowed its rivals, or in the long term such as the fantasy of taking over Damascus perceiving Taliban's takeover of Kabul as evidence of the practicality of strategic patience. This belief is what drives the HTS to maintain its rejection of a political solution, seek to maximize its control, challenge the constraints of the strategic environment, and promote a theory of war and governance.

To explain it further, first, key events and eras in old and modern history formed al-Nusra's worldview in defining its primary enemies and its perception of the conflict in Syria. The crusaders, the Persian empire, Western imperialism, the establishment of Arab nation-states, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were all used as historical lenses in perceiving the role of Western powers, Iran, and Arab states as sponsors of oppression against Sunni Muslims in Syria. The jihadist experiences of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, in particular, played a central role in shaping the group's strategic culture both in terms of adopting al-Qaeda's far and near enemy narrative, and its asymmetric warfare strategy.

Second, the failure of Jihadists to maximize their influence in Iraq which was assessed as a "lesson" by the group, particularly in terms of their relations with the local setting, along with the complex and changing security environment in Syria have prompted the group to peruse a flexible strategy as a survival mechanism. This in turn resulted in the evolvement of a flexible strategic culture prone to change through adapting to both the domestic political-cultural setting that does not share transnational jihadist fantasies, and the constraints stemming from the strategic environment, i.e. the international struggle against transnational jihadism, particularly after the rise of ISIS as threat to international security. In this context, al-Nusra's strategic culture evolved as highly adaptable and flexible to ensure the group's survival.

Third, while adaption to the strategic environment served the group well in its survival and evolvement mission, strategic resilience based on the jihadist elements of sacrifice, masculinity, fierceness, and revenge has also been crucial in preserving the very aspects that make a certain armed group a jihadist one. Indeed, by balancing adaption and resilience, al-Nusra managed to survive as a local jihadist group with a distinctive strategic culture.

CONCLUSION

The rise of violent non-state actors (VNSAs) has been one of the main characteristics that shape the political and security landscape of the contemporary Middle East, where traditional state principles have been increasingly challenged and claimed by VNSAs. Outstanding examples can be illustrated from countries across the Middle East: Yemen (Houthis), Lebanon (Hezbollah), Afghanistan (Taliban), and Syria (Hayat Tahrir al-Sam), which is the subject of this thesis. Although VNSAs are a significant subject of research, the approaches with which VNSAs are studied hold an assumption that VNSAs cannot develop strategic thought. Thus, the debate on strategy and strategic culture has been dominated by a state-centric approach. Against this backdrop, there is an emerging literature that studies the VNSAs as security communities capable of having strategic thought and culture, challenging the traditional assumption vis-à-vis the binary division between state and non-state actorness.

Do VNSAs develop strategic thought? Do they have a strategic culture shaping their way of thinking? Answering these questions requires defining the key pillars of strategic culture. The key pillars of strategic culture are identity, history, and leadership structure. When it comes to VNSAs, particularly the ones that have survived longer than a decade, one can identify these three pillars by examining their narrative and practices. This should not be interpreted as equating state and non-state actorness or their strategic culture content or characteristics. But it is, rather, an approach to move beyond the binary division between state and non-state to produce a more accurate understanding of the nature of the VNSAs in the realm of international relations.

This thesis has applied a strategic culture analysis on Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria. The HTS was formed under the name of al-Nusra Front in January 2012, joining the Syrian insurgency in its struggle against the Assad regime and playing a vital role in the conflict dynamics. In the beginning, it relied on the ISIS assistance to put a foot in the Syrian conflict. Then it refused to merge with the ISIS and pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2013 instead, depending on the latter's assistance to counter the former's growing influence. Finally, it broke ties with al-Qaeda in July 2016 initiating a transformation process that turned the group from a jihadist organization into a localized hybrid insurgency composed of an armed group and a governance body.

How has the strategic culture of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) evolved throughout the trajectory of the Syrian conflict? Answering this question required examining the strategic culture of the group before and after its breakup with al-Qaeda, taking into consideration the internal and external dynamics of the strategic environment which played an important role in shaping its transformation. This part provides overall findings to answer the main question of this work and adds a theoretical contribution to the existing literature on strategic culture and violent non-state actors.

Al-Nusra Front, the predecessor of HTS, was formed in January 2012 as a Jihadist armed group that sought to topple the Assad regime and establish an "Islamic Emirate" in Syria. The strategic culture of al-Nusra was driven by al-Qaeda's strategic culture, that is, a zero-sum understanding of war and a historical perception of conflict. The logic of the "near and far enemies" played a vital role in how al-Nusra perceived the strategic environment. It labeled Western states and Iran as historical enemies, "the Crusaders" and "the Safavid" respectively, the Muslim majority states as "agents of the West", the Western-backed opposition armed groups as "Sahawah", and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as "Kharijites".

Nevertheless, al-Nusra's domestic focus strategy rendered it different from the global jihadist movement, as it refrained from targeting the "far enemy", the Western states, maintaining a localized strategy to target the "near enemy", the Assad regime, as well as the Iranian-backed militias, the ISIS, and the Western-backed rebels. Yet, the domestic focus was not absolute. The jihadist transnational element appeared in its objective to establish an "Islamic Emirate", its recruitment of non-Syrian militants calling for "solidarity" with them, denial of national borders, and most importantly, its attempt to expand influence into Lebanon between 2013 and 2017 – a failed strategy.

Lastly, the tactical and operational guideline was based on the asymmetric warfare of al-Qaeda including suicide bombings, which was shaped by the glorification of violence, masculinity, revenge, and sacrifice, and a rationale of resilience against external pressure. This enabled the

group to gain its strong image and vigorous reputation among armed groups in Syria, proving itself vital in their struggle against the regime, and thus becoming part of the local setting of Syria.

The evolvement of al-Nusra in Syria reveals the key characteristics of its strategic culture. First, complex relation to old and modern history as a source of strategic culture, i.e. how it used historical events or eras ("Crusaders", "Safavid", etc.) to imply conflict continuity, and how jihadist experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq influenced the group's strategic culture in adopting al-Qaeda's "far and near enemy" narrative, and its asymmetric warfare strategy. Second, strategic culture flexibility, i.e. the ability to adapt to internal dynamics by focusing on the "near enemy", and building coalitions with the local insurgency – after assessing the failure of jihadists to do so in Iraq as a "lesson". Third, strategic resilience. This was based on the jihadist elements of sacrifice, masculinity, and fierceness in pursuing tactical and strategic objectives. The distinctive strategic culture of al-Nusra was a result of balancing adaptation and resilience in interacting with the strategic environment.

The transformation of al-Nusra into Hayat Tahrir al-Sham amending its strategic culture was triggered by the conditions of the strategic environment of the conflict. Three factors were defining in the trajectory of the transformation: a) The establishment of the international coalition to defeat ISIS and its targeting of al-Nusra's commanders constituting external pressure, b) the localization strategy of al-Nusra by which its local allies, particularly its enabler Ahrar al-Sham, exerted pressure on al-Nusra to cut ties with al-Qaeda as they were seeking Western support against the regime, c) the leadership of al-Nusra, which was able to initiate a norm-entrepreneurship, that is, the transformation process, gradually adopting the Syrian revolutionary nationalism and mixing it with the already localized Jihadism. In sum, the pressure exerted by the internal and external actors of the strategic environment, and the ability of the leadership to launch a norm-entrepreneurship have shaped the transformation process of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the successor of al-Nusra.

Al-Nusra first changed its name to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in July 2016, denying ties with al-Qaeda. After a transition period, the group transformed into Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in January 2017 gradually attaining territorial control and becoming de-facto authority. HTS's strategic culture is a result of diluting its jihadist identity by mixing it with the newly adopted revolutionary nationalist

one, culminating in a hybrid identity composed of the two elements, the "revolution and jihad" as analyzed in the group's narrative.

This has impacted the group's perception of the strategic environment and enemies. The HTS has moved beyond the logic of "near and far enemies", meaning that both the Jihadist and the national codes shape its new logic through which it perceives the nature of conflict and its enemies. Neither the "the Crusaders", nor the "agents of the West" are very relevant for the group's new logic. The Assad regime, Russia, and Iran are the main identified enemies, let them be in a national context such as labeling the struggle as a war for independence, or a jihadist context such as labeling Iran as a historical enemy of Sunnis.

Moreover, contemporary historical experiences, which are deemed similar by the HTS, appear to be more relevant as sources of strategic culture than the old historical events. The Taliban, which managed to take over Kabul in Afghanistan after nearly two decades of war in 2021, is viewed as similar in identity and as an experience that can be imitated. In addition to the increasing relevance of contemporary history, what is worthy of attention also is the incorporation of pure rational thought in perceiving the nature of international affairs as composed of actors of different interests, revealing different strategic tendencies in perceiving the strategic environment.

Against this backdrop, fighting the identified enemies was not the primary focus of the HTS. Rather, it was achieving territorial control, transforming itself into a de-facto authority and thus institutionalizing its strategic culture. To achieve this, two strategies were employed: a) the HTS relied on a strategy of persuasion and coercion to dismantle or bring its jihadist, Islamist, or revolutionary rivals under its control, ultimately achieving a monopoly of violence – an objective narrated as achieving unity; b) the HTS backed the formation of an associated civil administration, the Syrian Salvation Government, which provides or supervises all aspects of governance in its controlled areas, indicating giving up the old objective of establishing an "Islamic Emirate" without officially renouncing it.

Nevertheless, this does not suggest reversing all aspects of its extremist strategic culture. The aspects of glorifying violence, sacrifice, and endorsing the "spark of jihad" are still evident in the

group's narrative. In practice, the HTS has challenged the constraints of the strategic environment, i.e. the frozen conflict status quo imposed in March 2020 by a ceasefire brokered by Türkiye and Russia. The HTS continued to use asymmetric warfare tactics, particularly raids, to inflict damage on the regime and attempted to expand to the areas controlled by the Syrian National Army (SNA) in Northern Aleppo, seeking to achieve "unity", while labeling the SNA as "Sahawah".

It can be argued that the strategic culture of the HTS is inclusive of these two strategic tendencies, "fighting and building", or warfare and welfare, that is, building governance while continuing to glorify violence, transforming into a hybrid insurgency composed of military and governance wings. The combination of the two tendencies reflects the transformation of its objectives, i.e. giving up establishing an "Islamic Emirate", while holding onto the objective of overthrowing the Assad regime.

Altogether, they reveal a set of characteristics of the HTS's strategic culture in the post-al-Qaeda era: a) the hybrid identity consisting of the old jihadist identity and the new revolutionary one, b) the decreasing relevance of old historical events as strategic cultural sources, c) an increasingly institutionalized strategic culture, d) the existence of different strategic tendencies, i.e. warfare and welfare, e) the strategic patience in pursuing objectives, let them be a middle term such as the monopoly of violence after years of competing with rivals, or a long term such as the fantasy of taking over Damascus perceiving the fall of Kabul in Taliban's hands as evidence of the practicality of strategic patience.

In sum, it can be suggested that while the formation of the strategic culture of al-Nusra was a result of adapting al-Qaeda's jihadist strategic culture to the local setting, the strategic culture of its successor, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is a result of adopting the local political worldview and blending it with the already localized jihadist one, making up a national-Islamist strategic culture. Hence, it can be argued that the process of change produced two distinctive strategic sub-cultures: a) The old jihadist one, which is suppressed in favor of b) the newly evolved national-Islamist strategic culture which is more in compliance or perhaps less hostile to the conditions of the strategic environment, mainly the current status quo in Syria. Nevertheless, one should not ignore that the

future of HTS's strategic culture is still hinged on the same factors that triggered its transformation, the leadership, and the strategic environment - which is characterized by uncertainty.

This work has argued that politically motivated violent non-state actors (VNSA), including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Northwestern Syria, are capable of developing strategic thoughts and do have strategic cultures. The basic pillars of strategic culture are a) identity, b) history, c) leadership structure, and d) a "culturally relative and logical means-ends thought process." By examining these four pillars of strategic culture based on the case study of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, theoretical conclusions can be drawn on the formation of strategic culture, and the change in the strategic culture of violent non-state actors.

Identity is how a certain VNSA identifies the 'strategic us' and the 'strategic them', answering the basic question of why should the 'strategic us' fight against 'the strategic them' and what is the ultimate objective of this fight. Identity, here, is an ideological one that is built on grievances and reflects political aspirations. History is the main source of the strategic culture of a certain VNSA. Old and/or contemporary historical events are used also in the formation of the identity, i.e. the 'historical us' versus the 'historical them', and in forming the key assumptions vis-à-vis the nature of war and the root of the conflict. Identity and history are what shape the worldview of VNSAs.

Furthermore, the leadership structure is key in institutionalizing the two previous pillars of strategic culture, identity and history, and turning them into a strategic narrative that is utilitarian in securing the tactical and strategic interests of its VNSA, most importantly its survival and maximization of influence. Seeking to ensure these two, the leadership uses the strategic narrative to mobilize support for certain strategies or practices driven by the group's worldview or to justify others that are driven by the self-interests of the leadership or the constraints of the strategic environment. The logical means-ends thought, which is culturally relative to a certain VNSA, reflects also the endorsed theory of victory. This thought does not imply a purely rational one, the state-style thought. Rather, it is a type of rationality that is concerned with survival and maximizing influence regardless of the damage inflicted on them, or the "sacrifice" during the process – which makes a certain non-state actor a violent one.

The identity, history, and the means-ends thought expressed by the strategic narrative and the extent it has implications for strategies reveal the nature of a VNSA's logic, that is, its strategic culture. Thus, the strategies in practice are the result of how a certain VNSA, driven by a worldview and an ultimate political objective, seeks to maximize its influence by challenging or adapting to the objective conditions of the strategic environment. The tendencies to challenge or adapt to the objective conditions are culturally processed through the strategic narrative in which narratives and strategies influence each other culminating in the making of the strategic culture.

Change in strategic culture is the result of the internal or external pressure stemming from the strategic environment and the way the leadership responds to the pressure. The latter is hinged on to what extent the leadership structure is organized, to what extent it has previous experience, its ability to learn from such experiences, and the capacity to initiate norm entrepreneurship. The existence of these factors, along with the external pressure, is essential in launching a process of change in the strategic culture of security communities, the violent non-state actors in this thesis. The process of change involves change in both the narrative and strategies. While one can argue that the change in strategy is the most essential aspect of any concrete transformation, one should not also ignore that this change is culturally processed through the narrative as a carrier of the worldview. In addition, the change in the narrative itself reflects a significant aspect of the overall strategic cultural change, particularly when it involves a change in narrating the identity, history, and the means-ends thought.

The change in narrating identity is processed through accepting, adopting, and employing a new culturally relative identity and history without denouncing the original one. In other words, it is a process of including a new culturally relative identity mixing it with the old one to give rise to a new hybrid identity. As observed in the literature, jihadist VNSAs adapt their jihadist ideology to the local setting which renders them different from each other. Yet, the process of adaption, combined with other factors, can lead to a transformation, as in the case of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria.

Based on the new identity, the historical narrative is adjusted accordingly. As in the case of the reconstruction of the identity, the history including the "historical us" and the "historical them" is

narrated to reflect the hybrid nature of the identity. The same is valid for means-ends thought in which the new ends answer why the new 'strategic us' should fight, and the means are in compliance with the strategic environment that triggered the change in the first place. This does not necessarily mean getting rid of the old end-mean thought but maintaining it as a strategic tendency dominated by the new one that is in line with the contemporary conditions of the strategic environment.

In such cases, the very existence of the original and the new strategic cultural aspects in identity, history, and logical means-ends thought may have crucial implications for defining change in the strategic culture of VNSAs. It is arguable that the change in strategic culture, which involves the adoption of new cultural aspects without renouncing the original aspects, culminates in the emergence of two distinctive strategic sub-cultures where the new one is dominant and in compliance with the strategic environment. Arguably, the first original sub-strategic culture is suppressed because of its incompliance with the strategic environment and/or the self-interests of the leadership. This means that a change in the strategic environment or the leadership may reverse dynamics and give rise to the old sub-strategic culture – given that violent non-state actors are more prone to strategic culture change than state actors.

Finally, for further research, the study of the transformation process of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham through the lens of strategic culture provides a new perspective on the case study as well as on the emerging literature on strategic culture and violent non-state actors. Advancing this approach through comparative studies will provide us with a better understanding of how similar, distinctive, or different the strategic cultures of VNSAs are from each other. How do the factors of external pressure, external shock, and leadership structure influence the strategic cultures of different VNSAs? Answering this question requires more comparative studies that incorporate more VNSAs, particularly the ones that have seized territorial control and survived for a long time.

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APPENDIX A: QUOTATIONS OF THE STRATEGIC NARRATIVE OF THE AL-NUSRA FRONT

A1. Characters and Plot

A1.1.

"We are, I mean, a product of the products of global Jihad… if it wasn't for the Jihad carried out in Egypt in the 1960s, for example, it [Jihad] wouldn't move to Afghanistan, if it wasn't for the Jihad in the 1980s against this regime in Syria it [Jihad] wouldn't move to Afghanistan, if it wasn't for the Jihad in Afghanistan it [Jihad] wouldn't move to Iraq, and if it wasn't for the brothers who made sacrifices and maintained position in Iraq it [Jihad] wouldn't move to the Levant[407]."

A1.2.

"This conflict is divided between Muslims, Jews, Crusader forces, international powers—call them what you want—and the Safavid forces, represented by the Shia sect… These align and converge in their war against Muslims represented today by the Sunni population, but they differ in their disputes over this land[408]."

A1.3.

"The conflict, for a long time, is a sectarian conflict and it is natural… between truth and falsehood, the rule in Syria is the rule of the Nusayri sect which is called the Alawite… it [the regime] only ascended to power after it gave the Sunnis as a sacrifice to the international system to assure their satisfaction and acceptance of the ruler until this time. Now, as it [the regime] begins to struggle, they are trying to awaken him [the regime] once again, because Israel and the international system will not accept an alternative to the Alawite sect[409]."

A1.4.

"The mission of Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria is to topple the regime and its symbols, along with its allies like Hezbollah and others, and to cooperate with factions [the opposition] to establish a righteous Islamic rule that benefits the people of Islam. We have received directives [from al-Qaeda] not to use Syria as a launching base for Western and European attacks in order not to disrupt the ongoing battle. Perhaps al-Qaeda does this, but not from the Levant[410]."

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[407] "Liqa' al-Yawm | Qa'id Jabhat al-Nusra: Lan naqbal bi ayy masar siyasi yuḥi nizam Bashar 'ala hisab alam al-sha'b wa tadhihatih" [Today's Meeting | Leader of al-Nusra Front: We will not accept any political path that revives the Bashar regime at the expense of the suffering and sacrifices of the people], *YouTube/Aljazeera Arabic*, 19 December 2013 (Access: 1 June 2024). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIr1HoHJlQA

[408] *ibid.*

[409] *ibid.*

[410] "Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Istratijiyya Nash'at Jaysh al-Fath wa Muhimmat Jabhat al-Nusra fi Suriya (1)" [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. The Strategy of the Emergence of the Army of Conquest and the Mission of al-Nusra in Syria (1)], *YouTube/Aljazeera Arabic*, 33:00-35:00, 27 May 2015 (Access: 1 June 2024). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hwQT43vFZA&t=11s

A1.5.

"We will not impose a ruler on the people; we seek to uphold Sharia law. The ruler, whoever they may be, should be committed to the regulations of Sharia, suitable, and qualified in a way that satisfies us, and we are satisfied with what the Umma is satisfied with[411]."

A1.6.

"We have reviewed the history of all jihad work that has occurred across the globe, and we have tried our best not to make the mistakes we made… in our approach to combating the enemy, for example, in our treatment of people, for example, and in presenting our method[ideology], in all details, without compromising on the fundamental constants we believe in[412]."

A2. Sharia and Islamic Emirate

A2.1.

We will strive to establish a legitimate Islamic emirate based on the prophetic path, without accounting for any sentiments or adhering to any wrong Sharia policies. [In this emirate,] we will abide by the Sharia policies within the bounds set by God. Other than that we do not seek the opinions of the West, East, internal, external, or any of those who have submitted to them[413].

A2.2.

"The recent declaration of the caliphate by the Ghulat [ISIS]: A caliphate that is established on ruining the jihadist project that the Muslim Umma has aspired to for 1,400 years. It is a 'caliphate' founded by those who aim to capture your women, a caliphate founded by those who besiege your strongholds, and a caliphate founded by those who assist the regime in fighting against you. This caliphate is invalid and futile, even if they were to declare it a thousand times… We are striving to establish an Islamic emirate in accordance with legitimate Islamic principles. We have not yet declared it, but on the day when sincere jihadists and righteous scholars align with us, we will announce it[414]."

A2.3.

"This is the project of an Umma, the project awaited by the people of Gaza who are being bombarded, awaited by the people of Khorasan in Afghanistan, awaited by the jihadists of Al-Qaeda for forty years… You must aspire to the highest, aspire to Al-Aqsa Mosque, and liberate all the constraints that have bound the Islamic Umma… The time has

[411] "Liqa' al-Yawm | Qa'id Jabhat al-Nusra: Lan naqbal bi ayy masar siyasi yuḥi nizam Bashar 'ala hisab alam al-sha'b wa tadhihatih" [Today's Meeting | Leader of al-Nusra Front: We will not accept any political path that revives the Bashar regime at the expense of the suffering and sacrifices of the people], *ibid.*
[412] *ibid.*
[413] "Al-Imara" [The Emirate], *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya*, July 2014 (Access: 1 June 2024), https://ketabonline.com/ar/books/106877/read?part=1&page=114&index=4289571
[414] *ibid.*

come, my brothers, for us to seriously consider breaking the promise of Balfour. We must break it, and the Umma must prevail, Al-Aqsa must be liberated, and all our sacred sites must be liberated[415]."

A3. Historical Victimhood and Conspiracy

A3.1.

"We witness in the battlefields of the Levant, day after day, new images of the conflict that reveal an ancient historical depth and the ambitions and rivalries of those who aspire to establish empires and kingdoms. All of this comes at the expense of this blessed land's inhabitants… This began with the Crusades, then the era of colonization at the beginning of the last century, and then the planting of Jews in the region after the Balfour Declaration… the planting of corrupt, oppressive, and ungodly regimes that played its role in serving the Western agendas… Then the Rafida [Shia] revolt in Persia, penetrating the region and forming alliances at the highest levels, including their alliance with the Assad regime and the establishment of affiliated entities like Hezbollah in Lebanon. When one reflects on the stories of history, they find a common factor agreed upon by these nations, and that is fighting against Islam[416]."

A3.2.

"The ambitions they [Persians] seek to revive did not start in 1979; they began a long time ago, ever since the assassination of Umar [the second Islamic Caliph] by Abu Lu'lu'a Firuz, and the conflict that took place between Ali [the fourth Islamic Caliph] and Muawiya [the founder of Umayyad Caliphate] which many Persians exploited at that time… They use Shi'ism as a means to restore the glory of their empire. If they wanted to enter the region under the banner of the Persians, this would be impossible… Iran established cultural centers, and schools, and began to infiltrate neighborhoods in Damascus and interact with its traders using the same tactics employed when the Abbasids infiltrated the Umayyad state[417]."

A3.3.

"The Russian intervention has come to declare an Eastern Crusade… the Eastern Crusaders come here to say to all Muslims of the world, both in the East and West, 'We have come to eradicate your dignity and revive a dark history that is a thousand years old.' They have allied themselves with those who hold the utmost enmity towards Muslims and Sunnis: Those are Rafida and the Safavid from the Shia of Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Nusayris of Syria. They will thus repeat their dark history of allowing the disbelievers to subjugate Sunnis, just as their grandfather Ibn al-Alqami

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[415] *ibid*

[416] "Wa Qabilu al-Ayyam Khayrun Min Madiha" [And the days to come are better than their past], *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya*, July 2013 (Access: 6 June 2024). https://ketabonline.com/ar/books/106877/read?part=1&page=217&index=4289586

[417] "Bila Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Mawqif Jabhat al-Nusra min al-Rabiʿ al-ʿArabi wa Ra'ayhim fi al-Ikhwan wa Tanzim al-Dawla (2)" [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. al-Nusra's Position on the Arab Spring and Their Opinion on the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State (2)], *YoutTube/Aljazeera Arabic*, 2:25-16:30, 3 June 2015 (Access: 2 June 2024). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LK3QCWTPz_4

[the last vizier of the Abbasids before the Mongol invasion who kept his position during the latter's reign] did when he let the Tatars [Mongols] into Baghdad, and they plundered the Muslims, killing nearly a million of them[418]."

A3.4.

"The Nusayri regime [Assad regime] bombarded Eastern Ghouta with dozens of rockets loaded with suffocating chemical substances, resulting in the death of hundreds of children, women, men, and infants. The regime carried out this bombardment after receiving a green light from the international community, whose complicity in the crime appears evident to every observer and follower[419]."

A4. Rejecting the Political Solution

A4.1.

"Geneva [negotiation talks] is an attempt to revive the regime like a patient being shocked with electricity to bring it back to life. The international system is trying to revive this regime to the extent possible, but the process of regime revival has become impossible… Whoever will participate in Geneva is a partner in the sale of the blood that has been shed on the land of the Levant… We do not recognize this at all. These people who are engaging in dialogue in Geneva and elsewhere do not represent this society that has sacrificed this blood… In reality, these individuals have no impact or existence, and we will not accept them, even if we have to pay a high price[420]."

A4.2.

"All these political solutions are futile and will not lead to any result. Even the Muslim Brotherhood, who became submissive to the Western will and complied with it more than the West required of them. Morsi [a Muslim Brotherhood leading politician and the fifth president of Egypt who was removed from office in a coup led by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi] fought against the jihadists in Sinai [Peninsula in Egypt] and accepted the Camp David Accords. He entered the United Nations system, did not rule by God's law, participated in parliaments and elections, and embraced everything America wanted. So, what was the price? It was not Sisi who turned against Morsi, but it was the Americans who turned against Morsi, and their instrument in this was Sisi[421]."

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[418] "Al-Tadakhul al-Rusi, al-Sahm al-Akhir" [The Russian Intervention, the Last Arrow], *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya*, 18 February 2016, (Access: 2 June 2024).
https://ketabonline.com/ar/books/106877/read?part=1&page=80&index=4289566

[419] "Al-ʿAyn bi-l-ʿAyn" [An Eye for an Eye], *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya*, 25 August 2013 (Access: 2 June 2024).
https://ketabonline.com/ar/books/106877/read?part=1&page=148&index=4289574

[420] "Liqa' al-Yawm | Qa'id Jabhat al-Nusra: Lan naqbal bi ayy masar siyasi yuḥi nizam Bashar 'ala hisab alam al-sha'b wa tadhihatih" [Today's Meeting | Leader of al-Nusra Front: We will not accept any political path that revives the Bashar regime at the expense of the suffering and sacrifices of the people], *ibid.*

[421] "Bila Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Mawqif Jabhat al-Nusra min al-Rabiʿ al-ʿArabi wa Ra'ayhim fi al-Ikhwan wa Tanzim al-Dawla (2)" [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. al-Nusra's Position on the Arab Spring and Their Opinion on the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State (2)], 29:00-33:00, *ibid.*

A4.3.

"People must liberate themselves with their own strength, will, and the power of arms. Peaceful means and protests are a language not understood by these rulers. If the star of jihad had not risen in Syria, all those people who participated in protests would have been in prisons, and there would not have been liberated areas…Salvation lies in jihad for the sake of God, in combat. We do not see it in engaging in electoral battles or political conflicts[422]."

A5. Masculinity

A5.1.

"We declare a general mobilization to the sons of the Front [al-Nusra] in particular, and of the people of Jihad in general in the land of the Levant, to ignite it as a fire against your enemies, not sparing them any peace... Fight the oppressive, tyrannical, blasphemous, and their accomplices and recruits with no compassion or mercy. They have sworn not to relinquish power until the blood flows like streams, so let it be their blood that flows[423]."

A5.2.

"The strong man is the one who knows when to advance and when to hold back, who recognizes his enemy and his adversary as much as he knows himself. Half of the war is understanding the enemy… the strong man never rests; even if he does, he does not give his enemy rest. More importantly, he strikes fear into the heart of his enemy, terrifying and terrorizing them. He is a rational adventurer, navigating difficulties and not shying away from the towering ones, sacrificing himself for his Ummah. He is not a reckless adventurer who sacrifices his Ummah for his own sake, never becomes arrogant about his strength and never underestimates his enemy[424]."

A5.3.

"[A fighter should be] on his soldiers and people and tough on his enemy… Strength and severity are the bulwark for compassion and mercy when each is placed in its appropriate context. If the hearts of the mujahideen are devoid of compassion, it is cruelty and injustice. And when compassion is divorced from strength, it is negligence and weakness. Strength when compassion required is misconduct, and compassion when strength required is misconduct[425]."

[422] *ibid*.
[423] "Houla Massacre: UN Blames Syria Troops and Militia", *BBC News*, 15 August 2013, (Access: 9 February 2024).
[424] "Al-Tadakhul al-Rusi, al-Sahm al-Akhir" [The Russian Intervention, the Last Arrow], *ibid.*
[425] *ibid*.

A6. Sacrifice

A6.1.

"After months of lean times in the land of the Levant and the ferocious onslaught of killing children, attacking the elderly, imprisoning men, and violating the honor; the massive bloodshed has awakened in the hearts of the sincere [Juhadists] the meanings of sacrifice, redemption, heroism, and steadfastness. And has ignited in them the love for martyrdom, raising the banner of righthood and the peak of Islam [Jihad]... Every free person must take up a weapon to defend themselves and their honor, even if it means selling their household possessions. Religion and blood are more precious and prioritized[426]."

A6.2.

"Do not despair for those leaders of the Mujahideen who were killed. They did not fear facing death for the sake of God; they strived in the path of God as it should be striven. We are a people who do not die except in the shadow of swords, in obedience to god, and in the support of the religion of Islam… So do not weaken, do not grieve, be patient, show perseverance, stay firm and take good tiding. Our slain are in paradise, and their slain are in hell[427]."

A6.3.

"I remind myself and all of you of the pure, virtuous blood that has been shed on the soil of the Levant, not to be wasted or dispersed. This blood was not given to escape the tyranny of the Nusayri regime only to be lost in the darkness of the Western system. The fruits of sacrifice will only be harvested by those who sowed it[428]."

A7. Solidarity

A7.1.

"We believe that the jihadist group must include the element of the Muhajireen, as it imparts a global characteristic to it and distances it from territorial and national traits in battle. This is an important principle, a Sunni principle that we must preserve. Before the disagreement between us and the State group [ISIS], approximately 70% of the leading figures of the Front [al-Nusra] were Muhajreen. This percentage decreased after the disagreement to 40%[429]."

[426] "Al-Iʿlān ʿan Jabhat al-Nuṣrah [Announcement of al-Nusra Front]", *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya*, 23 January 2012, (Access: 01 June 2024).
[427] "Fi Ritha' al-Shaykh Abi Basir al-Wuhayshi [In Mourning of the Sheikh Abu Basir al-Wuhayshi]", *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya,* 23 June 2015, (Access: 5 January 2024).
[428] "Ahl al-Sham Fadaynakum bi-Arwahina [People of the Levent, We Have Sacrificed Our Souls for You]", 28 December 2012, (Access: 5 January 2024).
[429] "Al-Liqa' al-Sawti al-Awwal ma'a al-Shaykh al-Fatih [The First Audio Interview with Sheikh al-Fatih]", Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya, November 2014, (Access: 5 January 2024).

A7.2.

"I call on everyone not to forget the contribution of the Muhajreen who sacrificed their money and blood, choosing to join our land and be close to our people, being separated from their homeland and distant from their families. They showed the entire world that the spirit of Islamic brotherhood and feeling its tragedies are still alive in the hearts of Muslims. Be beside them in their exile, shelter and support them, be for them the nurturing mother and the warm embrace[430]."

A7.3.

"Be compassionate towards people, don't burden them beyond their capacity. Work hard in serving them, extend your wings to shelter them, show mercy to those on earth, and the One [god] in sky will show mercy to you. Be kind to their young, honor their elders, show respect to their notables, heed their advice, and elevate them to their deserved status. Overlook the ignorance of the ignorants and the unknowing of the truth [Islamism] by the masses over the years[431]."

A7.4.

"Continue to assist people in their essential needs and services such as managing ovens and bakeries, distributing necessary fuel, establishing clinics and medical centers, and contributing to reconstruction to the best of your abilities. Also, it is incumbent upon you to ensure security for the people and provide the means to resolve disputes. During a phase of authority collapse there will be a void you are the best equipped to fill[432]."

A8. Retribution and Reciprocity versus Morality

A8.1.

"To the mothers of the children and to our people in Eastern Ghouta, I say: avenging the blood of your sons is a debt on our neck and the neck of every Mujahid. It will not cease until we make them taste what they made our sons taste. God legitimized it to punish in the same manner… We announce a series of raids (an eye for an eye), raids launched on Nusayri villages. For every chemical rocket that fell on our people in the Levant, a village from their villages will pay the price, by God willing. Additionally, we're allocating a thousand rockets to be launched at their towns as revenge for the massacre in Ghouta. The blood of the Sunni sons is neither cheap nor insignificant as these fools believe[433]."

A8.2.

"The Alawites and Nusayris have committed enormous massacres against the Sunni people. This regime, since it began to rule approximately 40 years ago, has relied primarily on the Alawite or Nusayri component. These are the ones who

[430] "Wa Qabilu al-Ayyam Khayrun Min Madiha. [And the days to come are better than their past]", *ibid.*
[431] "Li-Ahl al-Wafa' Yahūn al-ʿAṭā' [For the People of Loyalty, Giving is Easy]", *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya*, 28 September 2014, (Access: 5 January 2024).
[432] "Ahl al-Sham Fadaynakum bi-Arwahina [People of the Levent, We Have Sacrificed Our Souls for You]", *ibid.*
[433] "Al-ʿAyn bi-l-ʿAyn [An Eye for an Eye]", *ibid.*

committed massacres in Hama, dropped explosive barrels on Muslim residents in all areas, tortured in prisons, raped women, killed children, and displaced millions of people across the countries - some drowned at sea, some beg for survival, and others sought refuge in camps in neighboring countries. They [Nusayris] are responsible for killing nearly a million Sunnis in the Levant. Thus, between the Alawites and the Sunnis, there is now immense vendetta, leaving behind deep wounds among the Sunni people[434].”

A8.3.

“I call on the heroic Mujahideen in the Caucasus to support the people of the Levant the way they can. If the Russian army kills from the ordinary people of the Levant, then kill from their ordinary people. If they kill from our soldiers, then kill from their soldiers. It's tit for tat, and we shall not aggress[435].”

A8.4.

“To the Nusayris and Alawites today, after all the massacres they have committed: Our religion is a religion of mercy, and we are not criminals or murderers. We fight those who fight us. We fight against injustice. Therefore, even for the Alawites, if we show them the reasons for their mistakes and their departure from their religion, and they retract from this and give up their arms and disassociate themselves from Bashar al-Assad's actions, then they will not only be safe from us but we will be the ones to protect and defend them[436].”

A9. Agents of the West

A9.1.

“There is no trust in these Arab rulers or the Gulf rulers. These people defend thrones and chairs. So whenever the chair gets in danger, they rush to protect it… The armies of the region: the Egyptian army, the Yemeni army, the Syrian army, and so on, have received millions of dollars and have been structured not to protect these people but to control them in case they revolt[437].”

A9.2.

“These rulers pay tribute to America. Yes, they pay tribute. Why does all this oil and petroleum go to America? What does it mean [to sell it] at a meager price? A few dirhams, what does it mean? What does it mean that most of the

[434] “Bila Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Istratijiyya Nash'at Jaysh al-Fath wa Muhimmat Jabhat al-Nusra fi Suriya (1) [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. The Strategy of the Emergence of the Army of Conquest and the Mission of al-Nusra in Syria (1)”, 5:00-9:00, *ibid.*
[435] “Al-Tadakhul al-Rusi, al-Sahm al-Akhir [The Russian Intervention, the Last Arrow]”, *ibid.*
[436] “Bila Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Istratijiyya Nash'at Jaysh al-Fath wa Muhimmat Jabhat al-Nusra fi Suriya (1) [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. The Strategy of the Emergence of the Army of Conquest and the Mission of al-Nusra in Syria (1)”, 9:00-13:025, *ibid.*
[437] “Bila Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Mawqif Jabhat al-Nusra min al-Rabiʿ al-ʿArabi wa Ra'ayhim fi al-Ikhwan wa Tanzim al-Dawla (2) [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. al-Nusra's Position on the Arab Spring and Their Opinion on the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State (2)]”, 19:00-24:00, *ibid.*

imports in Arab and Islamic markets come from European and Western countries? Why aren't these investments made in countries like Sudan, Syria, or Somalia[438].”

A9.3.

“The West has tirelessly strived, for three years, to undermine your jihad, in collaboration with regional governments, the coalition[opposition political coalition] - that betrayed your blood and that of Muslims -, and some of agent factions[opposition armed groups] which the West bought with some money and munitions to be their tools for their new Crusade project within[439].”

A9.4.

“Implementing the project of ‘al-Sahwah’ under the name of the national army started to get serious… The project of the national army seeks to establish a secular government and eliminate a righteous Islamic project. The al-Sahawahs in Iraq abandoned fighting America and the Rafidah[Shia], and started to fight the mujahideen alongside the enemies[440].”

A9.5.

“The traitor of Mecca, known as Sharif Hussein, aided the British and the French under the pretext of Ottoman oppression, while thinking he was doing good. History will remember him with the most hideous descriptions till the end of time. He replaced the oppression of the Ottoman state with the oppression of Jews and the Balfour Declaration, which we ask god to help us break it one day. Then, he was exiled by the British after his ignoble deeds and was barely able to make a living. We still endure the consequences of his betrayal today: the British dominance over Iraq, French one over the Levant, which ended in America's hegemony in the region[441].”

A9.6.

“They will train and arm them[the opposition] to eliminate Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State. This is the declared objective. And then, of course, [fighting] all Islamic groups or groups not aligned with Western policy that will be imposed in the region… Some factions gathered in Turkey, these are considered by the West as the 'moderate opposition' and supplied with ammunition and arms, priming them to act as their hand in the region. Among them, Jamal Maarouf[442].”

A9.7.

“Seeking victory through pursuing the West and regional states is chasing a mirage. Victory and the glory of Islam will not return through the hands of criminal killers or the agents of the West, who kept stabbing our back to appease the

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[438] *ibid*
[439] “Li-Ahl al-Wafa' Yahūn al-ʿAṭā' [For the People of Loyalty, Giving is Easy]”, *ibid.*
[440] “Laytaka Rathaytani [I Wish You Had Mourned Me], *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya*, 24 February 2014, (Access: 5 January 2024).
[441] “Li-Ahl al-Wafa' Yahūn al-ʿAṭā' [For the People of Loyalty, Giving is Easy]”, *ibid.*
[442] “Al-Liqa' al-Sawti al-Awwal ma'a al-Shaykh al-Fatih [The First Audio Interview with Sheikh al-Fatih]”, *ibid.*

Americans. True victory comes by obeying the command of god and uniting Muslims around sincere Mujahideen. The sincere Mujahideen are the solid foundation of the Ummah that, by God willing, doesn't weaken or falter[443]."

A10. The Folly of the Far Enemy

A10.1.

"I would like to remind the peoples of the West of the folly of their leaders in choosing war against Muslims. Bush came out celebrating the Taliban government's overthrow, and ten years later Obama came out reassuring the same people that he was trying to open a channel of communication with the Taliban. Al-Qaeda, which was confined to Afghanistan. After striking there, [al-Qaeda] expanded to Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Mali, Algeria, Iraq and then to the Levant, Last but not least to the Indian subcontinent. The battle has expanded and remains, and the Mujahideen, by god's will, are doing well in taking advantage of the folly of the leaders of the West. If the base of jihad expanded that much after striking Afghanistan, which is not as important as the Levant in terms of the sensitivity of geographical and historical position; What will happen after the Americans' invasion of the Levant, you see… The war that the West is waging in the Levant is undoubtedly a loss for them and a gain for us, by God's will, even if we taste some pain from it[444]."

A10.2.

"America, after the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, became in a state of regression; I mean, it became unable to send armies to fight outside its country… The void in the region, she [U.S.] knows exactly who will fill it. The mujahideen will fill it, al-Qaeda will fill it. So it tries; as it cannot enter with armies, instead, relies on the intelligence and the spy war, which is somewhat hurting killing leading figures. Drones don't give complete solutions, meaning they can't finish the al-Qaeda with drones, you can kill a commander here and there[445]."

[443] "Nasrun min Allah wa Fathun Qarib [Victory from God and an Imminent Conquest]", *Jami' al-Kutub al-Islamiyya,* 1 April 2015, (Access: 5 January 2024).
[444] "Li-Ahl al-Wafa' Yahūn al-ʿAṭā' [For the People of Loyalty, Giving is Easy]", *ibid.*
[445] "Bila Hudud | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. Mawqif Jabhat al-Nusra min al-Rabiʿ al-ʿArabi wa Ra'ayhim fi al-Ikhwan wa Tanzim al-Dawla (2) [Without Borders | Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.. al-Nusra's Position on the Arab Spring and Their Opinion on the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State (2)]", 11:00-13:00, *ibid.*

APPENDIX B: QUOTATIONS OF THE STRATEGIC NARRATIVE OF THE HTS

B1. Characters and Plot

B1.1.

"There are some people who try to tarnish the revolution's image; some are enemies, and some are not. They try to tarnish the revolution's image and to describe it in a certain way. Our role and mission in defending the people, defending their safety, their religion, their honor, their property and standing against a criminal tyrant like Bashar al-Assad, means that it's also our duty to transmit this image through your platform, or any platform, that can relay the truth to everyone around the world… this region does not represent a threat to the security of Europe and America. This region is not a stage for executing external operations[446]."

B1.2.

After the 06 February earthquake, al-Jawlani said the followings: "We call upon our Islamic and Arab Ummas, and the international community, to move from being mere spectators to participating in providing relief to the victims of the catastrophic earthquake in the liberated areas[447]."

B1.3.

"The enemies of God are striving against the Sunnis, in order to exterminate them, displace them, and wipe them out from this land. And the consequences of losing this battle in the land of the Levant are very big, not only for the people of the Levant, but also for all the Sunnis in all the region. Therefore, my brothers, you are not just defending 12 million displaced people and refugees, and a million martyrs, and blood, and land, and the women violated in the prisons of this regime. No. Rather, you are defending an umma in its entirety[448]."

[446] See Al-Jawlani's interview with Martin Smith, "Abu Mohammad al-Jolani Military Leader, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham", *Frontline*, 1 and 14 February 2021 (Access: 29 April 2024).
[447] "Mu'tamar li'l-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' Hawl al-Zilzal alladhi Ta'arrada Lahu Shamal al-Muharrar" [Conference by Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' on the Earthquake that Struck Northern Liberated Areas], *Amjad Media*, 0:00–2:30, 9 February 2023 (Access: 29 May 2024).
[448] New Video Message from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani: "A Session With Inghimasis" of the Red Bands in West Aleppo", *Jihadology*, 4 February 2020 (Access: 29 April 2024).

B1.4.

"As for the Iranians, they have huge interests in the region, interests that go long back in history, ancient history, the interests of the old Persian state, the Persian empire that used to exist in this region, that used to rule the region for a certain period and later withdrew from it. It used to fight over this region, with the Romans, and the Byzantines later on. They are now trying to restore their former glory[449]."

B1.5.

"The Islamic Umma has never experienced such humiliation as it has in the past hundred years… the Islamic Umma has been subjected to division and faced very serious problems. Even its distinct identity, its principles and ethics have been tampered with. Therefore, my brothers, our mission is immense and very significant, not limited to liberating land or managing a region, but a much greater mission than that[450]."

B2. Revolution and Jihad

B2.1.

On the anniversary of the Syrian revolution, al-Jawlani said: "These people deserve to live a life where conditions of justice and dignity are realized, a life befitting their history, past, and their noble origin. On the occasion of the blessed revolution, the Syrian people once again demonstrated their determination in the liberated areas and refuge countries, insisting on their demands and continuing their march to overthrow the criminal regime and rebuild the country and society. The criminal regime has affirmed its continuation in serving the interests of the Russians and Iranians and harnessing the country to them[451]."

B2.2.

"God says there is no compulsion in religion. The most important thing, no one is forced to enter Islam. We have nothing to do with the old thing that happened; it's something, honestly, we are not responsible for it, and the person who committed the crime, you know what happened in the end. We are innocent of it, God willing. We never accept

[449] See Al-Jawlani's interview with Martin Smith, *ibid*.
[450] "Mu'ayidat al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' li-Ahali wa Wujaha' Mintaqat Idlib" [Leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani's Greetings to the People and Notables of the Idlib Region], *Amjad Media*, 42:25–43:15, 12 July 2022, (Access: 28 April 2024).
[451] "Kalima bi-Munasabat Dhikra al-Thawra al-Thaniyya 'Ashara" [Speech on the Occasion of the Twelfth Anniversary of the Revolution], *Amjad Media*, 0:45-1:00, 17 March 2023, (Access: 29 May 2024).

anyone to be assaulted, whoever they are. Our revolution is not based on sectarian differences, it is a response to injustice. Our problem is only with the regime. This regime includes Sunni people who stand with the regime, killing civilians and receiving punishment at the same time. So it's not a revolution to discriminate between sects and so on. You have had your right here for thousands of years, so you have your right, like us… You are the same as any other region to us, there is no special law for you and a law for others[452]."

B2.3.

"O band of mujahideen, tell your ancestors that your trust has reached and that with the help of god, we carry it and support it. The spark of jihad has not been extinguished; it will continue to blaze within us until we witness the glory and greatness of Islam anew. We have begun to shake off some of the dust of humiliation that has befallen this Ummah. Indeed, armies have prepared and readied themselves, to face a fierce war that leaves nothing standing. We draw closer day by day to the meeting, as the end approaches. We will let our enemy see something never seen by a human before. The Ummah is returning to its glory and its pride[453]."

B2.4.

When addressing new graduates of the group's special forces, al-Jawlani said: "Victory is the result of hardship, fatigue, and many deeds that precede it. The story of the Taliban is not unique but repeats itself in every time and place. Its only capital is patience, piety, and dedication. We must not despair or weaken. I see victory near, and this victory must be preceded by preparation, as is happening now in the military wing. It is the true capital of any Islamic project. We ensure, God willing, to enter Damascus and to liberate this country from this tyrant and establish the rule of Islam, relieving the people from injustice and tyranny[454]."

[452] "Tadshin Mashru' Bi'r Miah li-Taghziyat 'Iddat Qura fi Jabal al-Summaq bi-Rif #Idlib" [Inauguration of a Water Well Project to Supply Several Villages in Jabal al-Summaq in the Countryside of Idlib], Amjad Media, 2:45-5:10, 10 June 2022, (Access: 27 April 2024).
[453] "Takrim al-Awa'il fi Dawrat Qiyadat al-Kata'ib bi-Hudur Qiyadat Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham" [Honoring the Top Graduates of the Battalion Leadership Course in the Presence of the Leadership of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham], *Amjad Media*, 7:00-10:50, 4 February 2022 (Access: 27 April 2024).
[454] "Takhrij Dawrat li'l-Quwat al-Khassa bi-Hudur Qiyadat Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham" [Graduation of a Special Forces Course in the Presence of the Leadership of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham], *Amjad Media*, 5:30-8:50, 27 August 2021, (Access: 26 April 2024).

B2.5.

"Some people limit the issue of implementing the rule of the sharia to just imposing some of the hudoud punishments, chopping off hands, stoning whomever, whipping someone who drinks alcohol, and so on. But this is a very basic part of the very big concept of implementing the rule of the sharia[455]."

B3. Model and Strategic Planning

B3.1.

In his speech on the anniversary of the Syrian revolution, al-Jawlani said: "We will build a new civilization era befitting of Syria and its people. And I bring good news to our people that the revolution has largely transitioned its components into a state of organization and strategic thinking across all its military, security, economic, educational, and service sectors under a revolutionary umbrella that anyone part of it is pride of, and it comforts the eyes of those who sacrificed and contributed. It serves as hope for those waiting, and this is nothing but the result of awareness, a sense of responsibility, and a course correction until the overthrow of the criminal regime[456]."

B3.2.

"The city of Idlib, which is now the capital of the revolution, will be a model for the region. Today, my brothers, we all witness the fruits of the liberated. It has been a long time since we have not treated the liberated as a faction[armed group]. The military aspect is managed by the military, but we are interested in the military side because this is the duty of the time. We are with everyone in the liberated, with all its institutions. Anyone living in the liberated is indirectly connected to us, and we cannot do without them, nor can they do without us. This integration is what creates a strong Sunni structure for the liberated, not a power for our individuals. This is a power for everyone[457]."

B3.3.

"Despite all the pressure exerted on the city of Idlib and the province of Idlib in general, considering the magnitude of the conflict in Syria, it has surpassed areas under regime control and areas managed by the SDF, despite all the Western support they receive. It has also surpassed areas under the [Euphrates] Shield and [Olive] Branch, despite all the support

[455] "New video message from Hay'at Taḥrīr al-Shām: 'Visit of the Commanders To Its Mujāhidīn Sons On a Blessed 'Īd al-Fiṭr'", *Jihadology*, 26 May 2020 (Access: 1 February 2024
[456] "Kalima bi-Munasabat Dhikra al-Thawra al-Thaniyya 'Ashara" [Speech on the Occasion of the Twelfth Anniversary of the Revolution], *ibid*., 3:27-4:15.
[457] "Mu'ayidat al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' li-Ahali wa Wujaha' Mintaqat Idlib" [Leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani's Greetings to the People and Notables of the Idlib Region], *ibid.*, 40:52-42:19.

directed there. All these capabilities are self-sufficient and simple, and the revolutionary personality remains independent in Idlib. No one dictates its decisions at all, and this is a very great blessing[458]."

B4. Fighting and building

B4.1.

"We are in the golden age of the Syrian revolution because, for the first time, we are uniting the military and civilian forces on one heart. We confront the regime with military and security forces, while at the same time, we work on building[governance]. Achieving both of these tasks simultaneously is only possible by the grace of God. This geographic spot was chosen for us to carry out both tasks because they are contradictory: war contradicts building. Therefore, it is our duty to build and fight the regime at the same time[459]."

B4.2.

"After the liberation of Damascus, my brothers, the challenges ahead are still tougher than those before the liberation. After overthrowing the regime, there is a major battle awaiting us. If we hadn't built these institutions and worked on harnessing human potential within organized educational, health, and service institutions, along with infrastructure, services, and the economy, we would enter new areas.; It will take us many years to rebuild them. As such, we are forced to fight and build at the same time[460]."

B4.3.

"What truly satisfies us is not constructing a building or a road, but it is to liberate Damascus, Aleppo, and every inch of Syria from this tyrant, by the permission of Allah. What we see as a step towards our path is every brick we build in the liberated areas. With each brick, we get closer to Damascus, Aleppo, and every part of Syria, by the permission of Allah. The regime is angered to see the liberated areas thriving and flourishing economically and socially. Our priority, by the permission of Allah, is the people more than the land. The regime may have gained control over some

[458] *ibid.*
[459] "Mu'ayidat Qiyadat al-Muharrar li'l-Wujaha' wa al-Kawadir" [Greetings from the Leadership of the Liberated to the Notables and Cadres], *Amjad Media*, 0:00-1:34, 27 April 2023 (Access: 26 April 2024). See
[460] "Mu'ayidat al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' li-Ahali wa Wujaha' Mintaqat Idlib" [Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani's' Greetings to the People and Notables of the Idlib Region], *ibid*., 15:30-16:15.

land in Syria, but our aim is to ensure that everyone who was displaced from Syria returns to a beloved and honorable land[461]."

B5. Integration

B5.1.

"O people, O honorable sons of the revolution, do not be saddened or despair because everyone near and far failed you. The revolution has its sons, leaders, and soldiers who work day and night to protect the revolution and serve its people. We have prepared ourselves and equipped ourselves for the great days ahead. This is an invitation from us to every sincere and zealous person to exert effort, strive sincerely, extend their hand to us, and stand by our side in facing these challenges and continuing the path until overthrowing the criminal regime[462]."

B5.2.

"All institutions contribute to building the liberated area, most prominently the military institution. Without the Mujahideen… Without their protection, without this protective barrier, we wouldn't have been able to lay a single brick in the liberated area. Therefore, all of us must serve the Mujahideen so they can carry out their role in protecting the liberated area, allowing us to build within it… Every Mujahid stationed at his post or working in any capacity, whether small or large, in the military or security apparatuses, is not just a participant but is the cornerstone and the first arrow in building and developing this liberated area[463]."

B6. Politics and Political Solution

B6.1.

"Political consensus and a political solution to the Syrian situation are difficult in the short and long term because many countries are involved in Syrian affairs, whether on the side of the regime or the Syrian revolution. All these

[461] "Bi-Hudur al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' Iftitah Tariq Halab - Bab al-Hawa" [In the Presence of Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' the Opening of Aleppo - Bab al-Hawa Road], *Amjad Media*, 11:45-12:50, 8 January 2022 (Access: 26 April 2024).
[462] "Kalima Mar'iyya li'l-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' bi-Unwan 'Lan Nusalih'" [Video Speech by Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' Titled 'We Will Not Reconcile'], *ibid*., 2:25–3:05
[463] "Hafl Mu'ayidah li'l-Ikhwa Musabi al-Ma'arek" [Event of Greeting the Brothers Wounded in Battle], *Amjad Media*, 3:25-3:40, 22 April 2023, (Access: 30 April 2024).

countries have conflicting interests, each with its own agenda that cannot be fulfilled without sacrificing the interests of other states. Therefore, achieving a consensus-based solution is largely impractical. Thus, relying on a military solution remains the primary approach, as it has been the essence of the revolution from the beginning and will continue until a significant victory is achieved in Damascus[464]."

B6.2.

In a meeting with local notables regarding the normalization processes with the regime, al-Jawlani said: "We are not in a state of weakness to resort to surrender options, as the revolution is strong, by God's will. If it decides on war, it can rightfully, by God's will, give it its due and liberate the areas. All the people in the liberated areas, most of whom are displaced, everyone hopes to return to their region, not just to return but to rebuild it anew. We aim to rid ourselves of this regime completely. I believe the regime is in its final days and has no means left to maintain its rule as it already used them, all of which have failed against the rock of the revolution.[465]"

B6.3.

"The people here do not accept guarantees, especially since there have been many experiences in Ghouta, Homs, and Daraa, and the revolution has learned from itself... There are many ideas that were proposed during the Syrian revolution and remained ideas that were not implemented, and they were dangerous ideas. We talk about many Genevas, we talk about a constitutional committee... And others do not have the ability to force the revolution to make decisions that do not serve its interests unless they resort to zero-sum options, and I think this is still far off[466]."

B6.4.

"The current coalition[Syrian National Coalition] is incapable of representing the Syrian revolution and confronting its current challenges. Recognizing it as such is an acknowledgment of it as opposition rather than a legitimate representation of all of Syria. I believe that this approach is no longer very fruitful because even external parties want to establish relations with those who have power[on the ground][467]."

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[464] *ibid.*
[465] "Liqaa al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' ma'a Wujaha' al-Muhajirin li-Hadith 'an Khuturat al-Taqarub ma'a al-Nizam al-Mujrim" [Meeting of Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' with the Notables of the Displaced to Discuss the Danger of Rapprochement with the Criminal Regime], *Amjad Media*, 16:25-16:55, 11 January 2023 (Access: 26 April 2024).
[466] *ibid.*
[467] *ibid.*

B7. Unity

B7.1.

"The first thing we needed was for authority to get stabilized in the liberated areas, as factional and partisan disputes within the liberated areas lead to a lack of development. With multiple factions involved in managing the areas, any developmental project in the liberated areas was hindered. However, when there was a kind of stability in the authority in the liberated areas and there became a government and institutions, the factions refrained from interfering in civil affairs and administration. They focused on the fronts which opened the door for development[468]."

B7.2.

During the inauguration of a road in Northern Idlib, al-Jawlani said: "What you see today is the beginning of an economic revival in the liberated areas. This is a result of unifying the authority in the liberated areas... If the authority is divided or shared among parties, factions, and formations in a country, there is no growth. Instead, there is destruction and ruin, and the growth wheel is either slow or completely absent[469]."

B8. Sacrifice

B8.1.

"We want the matter to remain voluntary, especially now that we are not dealing with soldiers but with mujahideen. Jihad is worship and the pinnacle of Islam. Therefore, it is better to have a desire for this rather than any sense of compulsion, because sacrifice cannot be bought for the fellow Mujahid. It is the spirit of sacrifice, and we surpass the enemy with courage and sacrifice. Anyone who desires this and comes forward for the sake of Allah, we encourage and foster this state of faith within them[470]."

[468] "Mu'ayidat al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' li-Ahali wa Wujaha' Mintaqat Idlib" [Leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani's Greetings to the People and Notables of the Idlib Region], *ibid*., 17:15-19:20.
[469] "Bi-Hudur al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' Iftitah Tariq Halab - Bab al-Hawa" [In the Presence of Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' the Opening of Aleppo - Bab al-Hawa Road], *ibid*., 6:40-9:00.
[470] "Mu'ayidat Qiyadat al-Muharrar li'l-Wujaha' wa al-Kawadir" [Greetings from the Leadership of the Liberated to the Notables and Cadres], *ibid,* 16:20-17:30.

B8.2.

"The reasons for victory and defeat lie within us; within our souls, faith, and our constant readiness for sacrifice and redemption, as well as our departure from sins and our repentance to God... We have no choice but to confront the occupiers, and to stay resilient before their injustice and tyranny. Either we achieve victory and triumph – we see it with our own eyes- or we attain martyrdom in the path of god[471]."

B8.3.

"Yes, in some battles we used martyrs. What does it mean? It's a weapon. We don't have airplanes to use in fighting the enemy. But the question is, who were the martyrs deployed against? The martyrs were deployed against the Shabiha [state-sponsored militias] and the Iranian and Russian militias trying to break into the area and attack the protesters at some point and kill innocent people. We used martyrs against them. This is not an act of infamy; it's an honorable act. A man sacrifices himself because he wants to defend innocent people who are being killed by … so it's a means. It's a means, not an end in itself[472]."

B8.4.

"The revolution is strong, thank god. It has built strong institutions and possesses geographical space and human resources. The fate of many Syrians is tied to the decisions made by the revolution. Today, we are fully prepared as a military force, waiting for a suitable opportunity to liberate the lands. We, my brothers, must have confidence in ourselves first, and then in the sacrifices made by this revolution over the past 12 years[473]."

[471] "Mu'ayidat Qiyadat al-Muharrar li'l-Wujaha' wa al-Kawadir" [Greetings from the Leadership of the Liberated to the Notables and Cadres], *Amjad Media*, 0:00-1:34, 27 April 2023 (Access: 26 April 2024).
[472] "Abu Mohammad al-Jolani Military Leader, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham", *ibid*.
[473] "Liqaa al-Qa'id 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' wa Riasat Hukumat al-Inqadh ma'a Wujaha' al-Manatiq al-Muharrara" [Meeting of Leader 'Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani' and the Presidency of the Salvation Government with the Notables of the Freed Areas]", *ibid*., 9:18-10:35.