



HTS's Offline Propaganda: Infrastructure, Engagement and Monopoly

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Executive Summary

- Propaganda has long been central to violent jihadi groups as a means to disseminate their ideology, terrify their enemies, attract recruits and collect donations. However, never have jihadists used this tool more aggressively and effectively than they do today, especially in Syria. This study illustrates how Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has been more prolific than other violent jihadi groups in its deployment or use of in-theatre propaganda and offline public diplomacy to increase its power and popularity as well as to entrench itself systematically within the local body politic.
- While its offline outreach operations includes producing and distributing media products, HTS prefers to share its ideological principles and sociopolitical values through long-term education and outreach activities. Towards that end, the group has invested a huge amount of time and energy in communicating with the local population, utilising dozens of scholars who regularly attend public *dawa* gatherings and campaigns.
- HTS's in-theatre public diplomacy activities have tended to rely heavily on already-extant structures and institutions such *mudafat*, *du'at al-jihad* [callers to jihad], *sawaed al-khir* [Goodwill Corps] and the Salvation Government, which continue to operate semi-autonomously and rarely fall under the group's official authority. By outsourcing such functions, the group has been able to save resources, specifically by limiting expenditure, thereby becoming a more decentralised – and therefore elusive – target for counter-narrative communication operations.
- Similarly, the group has been actively trying to distance itself from its somewhat in-house propaganda institutions, such as the Ebaa network and *maktab al-dawa wa al-irshad* [Dawa and Guidance Office]. Despite the common knowledge that those institutions are directly linked to HTS, the latter still attempts to present them as external organisations. This approach aims to enable its proxy media officials to propagandise on its behalf while themselves masquerading as independent actors.
- Instead of adopting a totalitarian approach towards censorship, which likeminded groups tend to do by banning anything not published by the group, HTS has been both less ambitious and more cautious, preferring to preserve relationships through more targeted negative measures. Through this gradualist and selective censorship, HTS and its antecedents have worked systematically to become one of the few hegemony in northern Syria's information landscape. While it remains far out of reach of a true information monopoly, the targeted damage it has inflicted upon the public discourse in its territories is likely to have lasting consequences.

- Understanding how HTS uses its strategic communication is a necessary step towards countering the group and its ideology. Towards that end, those involved should develop a better understanding of the various narratives and tactics the group uses to increase its legitimacy, credibility and popularity, which can then be used to develop a comprehensive, multi-strategy, online and in-theatre, approaches.

Introduction

Propaganda has long been central to violent jihadi groups as a means to disseminate their ideology, terrify their enemies, attract recruits and collect donations. However, never have jihadists used this tool more aggressively and effectively than they do today, especially in Syria. Instead of simply focusing on conducting communication operations online, even though this remains important, jihadi insurgencies have successfully improved their outreach by spreading their propaganda through direct engagement in their areas of operation with local communities. Among insurgencies, this study considers Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS),¹ which has been more prolific than other groups in its deployment or use of in-theatre propaganda and offline public diplomacy to increase its power and popularity as well as to entrench itself systematically within the local body politic.

Its offline outreach operations can be generally divided in two categories: “consumed” propaganda (focusing on media products broadcast or distributed by the group) and “performative” propaganda (relying on direct engagement with local populations).² However, the relative weight of each category differs significantly. The group usually opts for a more personal mode of dissemination, mainly in the form of the sharia cadres it sends to public places (namely mosques, camps and markets) to hand out religious literature. The materials they distribute vary, tending to be adapted to the group’s immediate priorities in a certain area. Sometimes, they consist of leaflets meant to mobilise specific groups against critical events – such as, for example, the political negotiations in Astana – or of sharia guidance promoting HTS’s rigid interpretation of Islam. These cadres also give out compact disks and flash drives loaded with lectures and leadership statements, although this occurs less frequently.³

Despite producing and distributing official media products itself, HTS prefers to share its ideological principles and sociopolitical values through long-term education and outreach activities. The group has invested a huge amount of time and energy in communicating with the local population, utilising dozens of scholars who regularly attend public dawa gatherings and events. In doing so, the group uses a combination of semi-formalised media distribution infrastructure (such as the newspaper *Ebaa* and dawa centres) and coopted local structures and institutions in its territories in northern Syria, which also enables proxy media officials, while still masquerading as independent actors, to advertise on HTS’s behalf.⁴ Notably, by outsourcing its propaganda activism in such a manner, HTS has been able to save resources and decrease expenditure, thus becoming a highly decentralised – and therefore elusive – target for counter-narrative communication operations.

1 Hayat Tahrir al-Sham: The group’s name has changed several times since its rise in 2013. In July 2016 it changed its name from Jabhat al-Nusra to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham after breaking ties with al-Qaeda. The group renamed itself Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in January 2017, marking a large-scale merger with other Syrian rebel groups. For consistency, this paper refers to the group as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

2 Charlie Winter, ‘Totalitarian insurgency: Evaluating the Islamic State’s in-theatre propaganda operations,’ *Naval War College Centre for Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups*, January 2018, <http://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/ciwag-case-studies/15/>, accessed 14 May 2019.

3 Author interview via Skype with Saad, a Syrian journalist, July 2019.

4 Author interview via Skype with Sultan, a Syrian researcher, June 2019.

Understanding how HTS uses its offline strategic communications is a necessary step towards countering the group, yet the issue remains under-researched, with most analyses of jihadi communication operations focusing on propaganda production and dissemination tactics over the internet. This paper aims to fill the research gap by shedding light on HTS's in-theatre communication operations, an aspect about which only little information is publicly available. On top of highlighting the group's infrastructure and direct means of engagement, the paper attempts to study how HTS conducts its offline propaganda through nominally unaffiliated institutions. Finally, it examines the group's approach to managing the flow of information in its areas of operation.

Central to the research question of this paper is a set of fifteen semi-structured interviews with Syrian analysts and journalists operating inside Syria, as well as experts in the field. As all crossing points into Syria from Turkey have been closed, it has not been possible for the author (who frequently visited Syria until 2015) to conduct direct field research on the ground. Instead, most interviews were conducted by the author online, principally via Skype and WhatsApp, between February 2018 and July 2019. These interviews are supported by secondary sources, including official statements, other documents, news coverage and social media commentaries.

The paper is structured as follows: first, it analyses HTS's semi-formal communication infrastructure, with special focus on its dawa centres, as well as the production and distribution of *Ebaa*; second, it highlights the various semi-independent networks and institutions HTS uses to spread propaganda on its behalf – these still tend to present themselves as independent actors, including *du'at al-jihad* centres, *sawaed al-khir* and *awqaf* [the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs of the Salvation Government] of the Salvation Government; third, it examines the group's means of engagement with local communities through campaigns and public gatherings; fourth, it explores HTS's restrictions on public discourse in its heartland territories. The paper concludes by highlighting the key aspects practitioners and policy-makers should pay attention to in order to plan effective counter-narrative measures against HTS.

Semi-formal In-house Outreach Infrastructure

HTS's offline outreach operations have relied heavily on already extant structures and institutions. Nonetheless, the group's media output is still produced by media organisations that could be considered somewhat in-house, such as the Ebaa network and the Amjad Foundation, which account for most of the group's videos, photographic reports and propaganda materials. While most of these organisations primarily share their materials online, Ebaa has been printing and distributing its newspaper, which is the focus of the first part of this section. The rest of the chapter considers *maktab al-dawa wa al-irshad*, which is in charge of HTS's direct in-theatre outreach activities.

Ebaa Newspaper

Ebaa news network launched its newspaper, under the same name, in June 2016. In the brief description provided on its website, Ebaa network (which was established as a news agency in March 2017) states that it aims to provide timely, exclusive, accurate and credible news coverage through a vast network of highly professional correspondents in all liberated areas in Syria.⁵ Despite its attempt to portray itself as an independent media platform, there is a widespread legitimate belief that the network is affiliated with HTS. While neither of the two entities has corroborated this claim, there are a few elements lending credence to this hypothesis:

1. Ebaa was established one month after the formation of HTS;
2. the network has played a crucial role in promoting HTS activities and undermining its opponents;
3. its reports on local and regional issues correlated highly with HTS's views;
4. Ebaa has always had a headstart in terms of obtaining quotes from and exclusive interviews with HTS officials;
5. HTS functions largely through various entities that are not directly affiliated with it, in an attempt to grant them wider credibility and avoid a clampdown on their activities.

The newspaper is divided into seven main sections: *shami*, investigative journalism or interviews, economics, columns, regional news, mixed news and visuals. The *shami* section focuses on local news across Syria, including military and political dynamics, services and humanitarian issues, and so on. It also includes a column on military tips, which could be used to target either civilians or fighters. Notably, this section is the largest and can take up to eleven pages (more than half of an issue, which usually amounts to 18 pages). The second section provides investigative reports

⁵ Ebaa Network, 'about us', *Ebaa Network*, <https://ebaa-agency.com>, accessed 13 May 2019.

on a single topic of interest, such as crimes, corruption, service provision, humanitarian and political issues, and so on. Alternatively, it sometimes publishes exclusive interviews with military or political officials, namely from either HTS or its affiliate, the Salvation government. The third section focuses on economic news in Syria and the region, including prices, sanctions or scandals.

The fourth section is typically divided into two columns: one provides medical tips while the other is dedicated to opinion pieces. The fifth section highlights the latest political and military developments in the region, with specific focus on Iran and countries that experienced Arab Spring demonstrations. While international news is primarily included in this section, sometimes it is published in a separate section dubbed 'international'. The section also includes an advice column largely dedicated to sharia scholars spreading dawa messages. The sixth section publishes a mixture of news on various issues including sport, technology and cybersecurity. Additionally, the section has a subsection dedicated to puzzle games, crosswords, sudoku and weekly contest with a reward of 8,000 SYP. The final section publishes a number of images from photo stories and videos released by the network during the previous week.

The newspaper was initially published, usually on Saturdays, as a digital weekly newspaper. Soon, however, the network started publishing and disseminating hard copies of the paper. The aim of this was likely to reach those who did not have time for or access to online news.⁶ Not much is known about the processes of printing and distributing the papers themselves. However, Ebaa released a video in April 2019 that sheds light on parts of those operations.⁷ The clip shows a number of heavy-duty printing machines capable of printing thousands of copies per day. It also features a boy giving out copies of the newspaper from the passenger seat of a car. The video highlights that most of the paper's distribution is carried out by a network of individuals handing out copies in public places, namely markets.

Local sources confirmed that *Ebaa* is usually delivered in person, but the paper does not have a reliable distribution system. For example, there is no schedule or timetable for the newspaper delivery. Similarly, there is no fixed distribution point that people can visit to get a copy of the newspaper. Besides, the newspaper's distribution is largely limited to the main urban centres and HTS's strongholds, while remote areas are usually neglected.⁸ Despite the limited distribution of the newspaper, which could plausibly be related to lack of financial resources, manpower or interest, the process further confirms HTS's preference for performative propaganda over consumed types.

⁶ Author interview via Skype with Ibrahim, a Syrian journalist, February 2019.

⁷ Ebaa Network, 'Ebaa prints and distributes its newspaper in the liberated areas,' *Ebaa Network*, 30 April 2019, <https://videos.ebaa.news/watch/7uqE1SUVUjtESkt>, accessed 14 May 2019.

⁸ Author interview via Skype with Ibrahim, a Syrian journalist, February 2019.

Maktab al-dawa wa al-irshad [Dawa and Guidance Office]

Due to the importance of dawa for the group's goals and survival, HTS has created a special body to engage in dawa activities and disseminate its materials. It is not clear when the first dawa centre was established in Syria, but it seems that most of the media coverage of HTS's dawa centres goes back to 2014. Prior to that, HTS (known as Jabhat al-Nusra at the time) had established offices in various areas, but those workplaces were largely used as political or liaison facilities.⁹ The aim of dawa centres, as identified by the group, is to "spread the word of Allah and incite people to join Jihad".¹⁰ Notably, the group's decision not to add its name on the signs of its dawa centres has allowed HTS to establish those facilities outside its strongholds, including in areas controlled by its rivals.¹¹

It is not clear how many dawa centres HTS has been able to establish, as it has not published any official numbers on the matter. But according to Ebaa news network, the group has centres in most of the main towns and cities of Idlib and rural Aleppo.¹² According to various sources, the size and structure of the dawa centres vary between areas of operation. In the group's heartlands the size of such offices is relatively large: they usually have at least one multi-function room, as well as a reception where publications are displayed. However, in areas where the group has restricted to no presence at all, such facilities are usually limited to a small space filled with a few chairs and dawa materials on display.

The staff and activities of dawa centres are divided into two main categories: "mobile" and "indoors". The number of people who are present at the centres is usually limited to one to two persons, the majority of which are Syrians. Their job is mainly limited to opening the centre, managing the distribution of dawa materials and engaging with visitors. Those individuals usually participate in outdoor activities, which include:

1. Hanging posters and installing or maintaining dawa billboards;
2. Distributing booklets and pamphlets in public places;
3. Conducting private and public dawa sessions;
4. Screening audio-visual material;
5. Organising dawa campaigns.

While the people in charge of these activities are typically a mixture of Syrians and foreigners, the latter are usually the ones in charge of preaching, while the Syrian staff support them and look after logistics. Unlike the outdoor activities, for which monetary and other rewards are provided, dawa centres themselves do not usually provide material incentives – or use intimidation – to encourage people to use them. As such, successful outreach is usually linked to the popularity of HTS in the areas in which a facilities are located. However, multiple sources have indicated that people do not usually use the centres very much.

⁹ Rafat al-Rifai, 'Interviewing the head Jabahet al-Nusra's political office in Aleppo,' *Zaman al-Wasel*, 12 January 2013, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/34990/>, accessed 12 May 2019.

¹⁰ al-Fastat media, 'the opening ceremony of Jabhat al-Nusra's dawa centre in Salqin,' *Archive*, 2014, https://archive.org/details/mn_slkeen, accessed 14 May 2019.

¹¹ Author interview via Skype with Samer, a Syrian analyst, February 2019.

¹² Ebaa Network, 'Tahrir al-Shama's dawa centre organises a public gathering for the people of southern Idlib,' *Ebaa Network*, 6 November 2018, <https://ebaa.news/news/news-details/2018/10/16640/>, accessed 14 June 2019.

That could be attributed in part to a lack of interest, especially since centres do not offer new or attractive materials to maintain the attention of visitors. (Notably, the dawa materials distributed in HTS's centres are not all produced by the group. A sizeable percentage of the publications are authored by scholars ideologically aligned with the group.) It could also be due to the significant increase in the number of other dawa centres and institutions, which are considered more active and provide indoor courses and activities, to be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

HTS has prioritised the strategy of investing its resources to spread its ideological principles and sociopolitical values through long-term education and performative outreach. Consequently, instead of focusing its efforts on building and promoting its brand and infrastructure, it has favoured outsourcing its in-theatre propaganda through semi-independent networks and institutions, discussed in more detail in the following section.

Semi-independent Networks and Institutions

HTS's outreach efforts rely on various measures across its areas of operation. Alongside its semi-formalised media distribution infrastructure, HTS has coopted a number of already- extant structures in its territories in northern Syria, which enables proxy media officials to propagandise on the group's behalf, all the while masquerading as independent actors.

Affiliate Religious Education and Dawa Centres

Running in parallel with the above, HTS also presides over networks of religious education centres, which rarely fall under the official HTS rubric.¹³ Administered by scholars and volunteer corps, these institutions usually operate semi-autonomously to augment the group's official outreach operations. The most famous among these is the *du'at al-jihad* centres, which operate under the watchful eye of the Saudi jihadi cleric Abdullah al-Muhaysini.¹⁴ With tacit encouragement and endorsement from HTS, *du'at al-jihad* centres have proliferated across northern Syria in the past few years. Although their staff are always cautious to distance themselves from group affiliations, locals interviewed by the author widely consider them to be part of HTS.¹⁵

This can be attributed to the efforts of al-Muhaysini, raising funding and even recruiting fighters for the group despite his decision to join formally and then to leave HTS in January and September 2017 respectively.¹⁶ *Du'at al-jihad* centres can be divided by the programmes they offer into three categories: religious education centres, dawa campaigns and military training centres. While briefly touching on military training, this section will mainly focus on religious education centres. The dawa campaigns' programme will be discussed in detail later in this section.

Based on their target groups and activities, these centres can be divided into three main groups. The first category focuses on children, coaching them in *tahfidh* (memorising verses of the Qur'an), *tajwid* (the art of reciting the Qur'an) and sharia jurisprudence. Some institutions within this category are flexible in terms of the age group they support as well as the teaching hours. Among those is the Ibin Abbas centre, which accepts students between the age of ten and 18. It has a flexible schedule to attract children from other commitments (such as schools or local job markets) and thus does not commit to lengthy courses or opening hours. To accommodate all levels, it provides two tiers of education: beginner and advanced levels.¹⁷

¹³ Author interview via Skype with Mohammed, the coordinator of 24CR, a civil resistance group against extremism, February 2018.

¹⁴ Author interview via Skype with Ahmed, a Syrian journalist, February 2018.

¹⁵ Author interview via skype with Orwa Khalifa, a Syrian journalist, February 2018.

¹⁶ Author interview via skype with Obaida Amer, a Syrian researcher, July 2019.

¹⁷ *du'at al-jihad*, 'Ibin Abas sharia institution,' *du'at al-jihad twitter channel*, 25 March 2018, <https://twitter.com/duatajjihad50/status/977948163045773312>, accessed 3 May 2019.

Other centres, such as Zayd Ibn Thabit, have stricter admission requirements including:

1. age restrictions (15+);
2. minimum level of knowledge (at least three parts of the Qur'an memorised);
3. an interview test;
4. other skills (such as being able to pronounce and recite correctly).¹⁸

Such programmes have schedules that match their strict entry requirements, somewhat akin to boarding schools; students are expected to stay at the premises during the courses, which are divided into three levels, each one lasting three months.¹⁹ Despite these differences, all those centres provide free books and awards for the students who excel in their studies. Notably, in addition to their religious courses, some of those centres occasionally offer physical activities, such as martial arts classes.²⁰ Some of those activities take place indoors at the centres, while others are part of training camps where students are given a month's military training covering how to use light weapons (namely guns and automatic rifles).²¹

The second category, such as the al-'Izz bin 'Abdulsalam Centre, targets older teenagers and young men, seemingly hoping to develop them into HTS-sympathetic preachers for eventual deployment at local mosques and dawa centres.²² Due to the important role these students are expected to play in the future, the centres apply stricter admission requirements including:

1. age restrictions (18+);
2. a minimum level of knowledge (such as completing at least one sharia course in the past);
3. an interview test;
4. nomination by a notable jihadi scholar.²³

These centres operate like boarding schools and provide their students with free food, accommodation and stationery. In terms of the courses, they offer two tiers of education. The first typically lasts four months and focuses on introducing students to *al-'ulum al-shar'iah* [sharia sciences]; completion of this tier allows progression to the second tier, in which students engage in more advanced sharia courses for a further six months.²⁴ Notably, teaching staff often float between more than one centre – for example, the Dar al-Arqam²⁵

18 du'at al-jihad, 'A call for the seventh round of tahfedh course at Zayd Ibn Thabit institute,' *du'at al-jihad twitter channel*, 25 March 2018, <https://t.me/da7at/3521>, accessed 2 May 2019.

19 ibid.

20 Dar al-Arqam Centre, 'Graduation ceremony of the first course at Dar al-Arqam center', *Dar al-Arqam Centre*, 23 August 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5NK8YVtva0>, accessed 3 June 2019.

21 Zaman al-Wasel, 'Muhaysini opens a training camp for cubs,' *Zaman al-Wasel*, 13 September 2014, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/53341>, accessed 12 May 2019.

22 Author interview via skype with Ali El Yassir, Middle East analyst focusing on violent extremist groups, February 2018.

23 du'at al-jihad, 'A call for the ninth round of sharia training for imams at al-'Izz bin 'Abdulsalam Centre,' *du'at al-jihad youtube channel*, 14 May 2018, <https://youtu.be/MoUVd3NW0k8?t=241>, accessed 14 May 2019.

24 al-'Izz bin 'Abdulsalam Centre, 'Graduation ceremony of the eighth course at al-'Izz bin 'Abdulsalam Centre', *al-'Izz bin 'Abdulsalam Centre*, 14 February 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=91&v=PeA9nTI3h9w, accessed 16 June 2019.

25 Dar al-Arqam Centre, 'Graduation ceremony of the first course at Dar Al-Arqam center', *Dar al-Arqam Centre*, 23 August 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5NK8YVtva0>, accessed 10 June 2019.

and al-'Izz bin 'Abdulsalam²⁶ centres share at least two teachers, each of whom have featured prominently in the centres' respective graduation videos.

Besides this, there are also female-only *du'at al-jihad* centres, such as the 'Umar bin al-Khattab,²⁷ Umm 'Ammarah²⁸ and 'Aisha Umm al-Mu'minjn'²⁹ institutions, wherein female attendants are provided with similar theological training and ideological coaching. The aim appears to be to use female supporters as a vector for ideology, a way to spread its accompanying world view into both public and private spheres. After all, if the mother is a supporter of violent jihad, she herself will work to radicalise and recruit her children for its cause.^{30,31} To attract as many students as possible, these centres target all age groups and provide them with three levels of course: beginner, intermediate and advanced. Unlike male institutions, these centres don't usually offer accommodation as the idea of allowing women to sleep outside the house is socially unacceptable. Instead, they provide their female students with free transportation to and from their houses. Notably, it seems that the majority of the students attending such courses are mothers; as a result, the centres usually provide them with free childcare to make their studies easier and more enjoyable.³²

In addition to the religious courses provided by the centres, some of them – namely the ones targeting young children – occasionally offer physical activities, such as martial arts classes.³³ Some of those activities take place indoors at the centres, while others are part of more advanced military training camps. Although such camps are organised by *du'at al-jihad* centres, they are usually open to any child over the age of 13.³⁴ Nonetheless, most of the attendees are students of the centres, encouraged to sign up by the scholars who continuously teach them about the importance of jihad.³⁵ Similar to other camps, children are taught about weapons (guns and rifles), fighting techniques and sharia.³⁶ These camps usually last for a month and train 60 children at a time, providing them with accommodation and food as they do.³⁷ Both the camps and the centres seem to depend financially on the money that al-Muhaysini is able to raise either through fundraising campaigns inside Syria or through private donations he is able to secure abroad, namely in the Gulf.³⁸ This is attributed mainly to his involvement in fundraising for jihad in Syria, while still living in Saudi Arabia.³⁹ What makes such sharia

26 al-'Izz bin 'Abdulsalam Centre, 'Graduation ceremony of the eighth course at al-'Izz bin 'Abdulsalam Centre', *al-'Izz bin 'Abdulsalam Centre*, 14 February 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=91&v=PeA9nTl3h9w, accessed 16 May 2019.

27 Umar bin al-Khattab Centre, 'Graduation ceremony of the first course at Umar bin al-Khattab Centre', *Umar bin al-Khattab centre*, 14 September 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwWQGeJckBs>, accessed 13 June 2019.

28 Umm 'Ammarah Centre, 'Graduation ceremony of the fourth course at Umm 'Ammarah Centre', *Umm 'Ammarah centre*, 11 September 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDifRPkTSqM>, accessed 13 June 2019.

29 du'at al-jihad, 'A call for the seventh round of daya't training course Aisha Umm al-Mu'minin', *du'at al-jihad twitter channel*, 28 June 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTKj-oo_wLI, accessed 13 May 2019.

30 Author interview via Skype with Ahmed, a Syrian journalist, February 2018.

31 Author interview via Skype with Mohammed, the coordinator of 24CR, a civil resistance group against extremism, February 2018.

32 du'at al-jihad, 'A call for the seventh round of daya't training course Aisha Umm al-Mu'minin', *du'at al-jihad twitter channel*, 28 June 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTKj-oo_wLI, accessed 13 May 2019.

33 Dar al-Arqam Centre, 'Graduation ceremony of the first course at Dar Al-Arqam center', *Dar al-Arqam Centre*, 23 August 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5NK8YVtva0>, accessed 10 May 2019.

34 Zaman al-Wasel, 'Muhaysini opens a training camp for cubs', *Zaman al-Wasel*, 13 September 2014, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/53341>, accessed 12 May 2019.

35 Author interview via Skype with Samer, a Syrian analyst, February 2019.

36 du'at al-jihad, 'Graduation ceremony of the first course at cubs' training camp for Mujahidien', *du'at al-jihad*, 23 August 2017, https://archive.org/details/duataljihad_gmail_01_201601, accessed 10 May 2019.

37 Author interview via Skype with Samer, a Syrian analyst, February 2019.

38 Author interview via Skype with Yassir, a Syrian journalist, a Syrian journalist, February 2019.

39 Author interview via Skype with Samer, a Syrian analyst, February 2019.

centres, especially those affiliated with HTS, more attractive is their ability to facilitate the recruitment of students in HTS affiliate civilian administration departments, such as courts, local councils, media platforms, awqaf and others.⁴⁰

Sawaed al-khir [Goodwill Corps]

Sawaed al-khir claims to have been established in August 2017 in Idlib by a team of civilian volunteers doing their duty to implement sharia law. It identifies itself as an executive authority in charge of enforcing sharia and administrative regulations on all aspects of communities, institutions, organisations and individuals in its areas of operations.⁴¹ However, locals generally view the group as an extension of HTS and its police. The common assumption is that *sawaed al-khir* is a rebrand of HTS's *hisbeh* [religious police], which was viewed negatively due to its intervention in people's personal lives. Consequently, the name of the body was changed to allow it to operate nominally independently, in an attempt to protect itself as well as HTS. To support their claim, local sources highlighted that HTS's emir of *hisbeh*, Ahmed Agha, is also a commander of *sawaed al-khir*, which suggests a link between the two entities.⁴² Moreover, *sawaed al-khir* enjoys executive authority (such as the ability to arrest, punish people, and so on), which HTS would likely refrain from sharing with independent entities.⁴³

According to the group's documents, *sawaed al-khir* seems to include two distinctive components:

- **The promotion of virtue and prevention of vice office:** this office's main goal is to impose conservative Islamic norms of behaviour on people. To that end, it is responsible for several issues, including monitoring the women's veil and Islamic dress, preventing smoking in public places and confiscating tobacco from traders. Moreover, it prevents the sale and purchase of musical instruments and anything related to music, as well as the mixing between men and women in public and private places.⁴⁴ To ensure locals' compliance, it has created daily patrols to monitor the implementation of its sharia regulations in public places, namely streets, markets, schools, hospitals, and so on.⁴⁵ The office hires male and female staff to monitor the streets of Idlib and punish wrongdoers. While some of the office members are hired through personal connections, others, especially female members, are recruited through public calls.⁴⁶ To encourage people to join, the office provides its staff with a monthly allowance plus compensation for family members (namely spouses and children).⁴⁷

40 Author interview via Skype with Saad, a Syrian journalist, June 2019.

41 sawaed al-khir, 'al amr bil ma'ruf wa nahi anil munkar office,' *sawaed al-khir Facebook page*, 22 March 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/sawaeid.alkhayer/photos/a.153290755336550/157103284955297/?type=3&theater>, accessed 14 May 2019.

42 Author interview via Skype with Ayman, a Syrian analyst, February 2019.

43 Author interview via Skype with Ibrahim, a Syrian journalist, February 2019.

44 sawaed al-khir, 'al amr bil ma'ruf wa nahi anil munkar office,' *sawaed al-khir Facebook page*, 22 March 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/sawaeid.alkhayer/photos/pcb.157103301621962/157103224955303/?type=3&theater>, accessed 14 May 2019.

45 Author interview via Skype with Samer, a Syrian analyst, February 2019.

46 sawaed al-khir, 'A recruiting call for female members to join sawaed al-khir,' *sawaed al-khir Facebook page*, 25 March 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/sawaeid.alkhayer/photos/a.153337025331923/24029099969858/?type=3&theater>, accessed 14 May 2019.

47 Author interview via Skype with Mohamad, a Syrian analyst, July 2019.

- **Complaints office:** this office is dedicated to receiving complaints from locals regarding the religious or administrative issues with which they are struggling. Such matters vary from the reporting those suspected of acting unvirtuously (such informing is highly encouraged) to administrative problems (namely corruption and the abuse of power abuse).⁴⁸ Once filed, the group should theoretically ensure that the case is thoroughly addressed. In some locations (namely in HTS's urban strongholds) this function is done by a specialised team and office, while in others (where the group's team or the centre itself is small) people can report their issues to any group member they encounter, either in the streets or inside the premises. The group states that it receives such complaints daily; locals, however, stated that people do not usually file cases with the former.⁴⁹

Unlike other groups nominally independent from HTS, the extent of *sawaed al-khir*'s authority allows it to go beyond guiding people or reminding them of proper conduct. Instead, it acts to all intents and purposes like a community police force, capable of punishing violators as well as conducting investigations and even carrying out arrests (detainees are then handed to HTS police stations).⁵⁰ *Sawaed al-khir* members have frequently beaten and verbally abused sharia violators in public places and arrested them when they refused to obey instructions. On 11 February 2019, a *sawaed al-khir* patrol reportedly detained six youths in Idlib for wearing jeans. The young men were accused of violating the dress code imposed by the extremist alliance and were taken to a Tahrir al-Sham post, where they were flogged with 20 lashes, ten to the back, ten to the legs.⁵¹

Similarly, the director of a private association for the empowerment of women in Idlib was summoned to the female *sawaed al-khir* centre in May 2018. When she arrived, a woman interrogated her and demanded the termination of the psychosocial support sessions the centre was providing to local women. The director was threatened with arrest, insulted and told that her association would be shut down and she would receive a fine of up to \$5,000 if she did not comply.⁵² More importantly, *sawaed al-khir* through its operation room, dubbed Idlib *al-khir*, was able to impose a three-day curfew in the city due to assassination attempts on mujahideen, religious scholars and others.⁵³

On top of these tasks, *sawaed al-khir* organises campaigns and gatherings similar to those discussed in the previous section. It is not clear where the office gets its funding from, but it seems that it largely depends of the fines it collects from those charged with violating sharia laws. Local sources stated that the fines for violators range from 2,000 to 20,000 Syrian pounds and that ten to 15 violations are registered in Idlib every day. Besides violators, *sawaed al-khir* targets the owners of clothing shops and barbers who have not adhered to its regulations, including covering the heads of their mannequins.⁵⁴

48 *sawaed al-khir*, 'sawaed al-khir office receiving complaints from locals,' *sawaed al-khir Facebook page*, 30 March 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/sawaeid.alkhayer/photos/a.153290755336550/158903201441972/?type=3&theater>, accessed 14 May 2019.

49 Author interview via Skype with Ibrahim, a Syrian journalist, February 2019.

50 Author interview via Skype with Samer, a Syrian analyst, February 2019.

51 Author interview via Skype with Samer, a Syrian analyst, February 2019.

52 Author interview via Skype with Ibrahim, a Syrian journalist, February 2019.

53 Idlib al-Khir, 'A curfew announcement,' *sawaed al-khir Facebook page*, 27 April 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/sawaeid.alkhayer/photos/a.153290755336550/165228747476084/?type=3&theater>, accessed 14 May 2019.

54 Author interview via Skype with Ibrahim, a Syrian journalist, February 2019.

Notably, the presence and behaviour of *sawaed al-khir* is limited largely to HTS strongholds: they still do not exist in other areas nominally under the control of HTS.⁵⁵

The Salvation Government

The Salvation Government, namely its *awqaf*, is considered another means through which HTS spreads its ideology through sharia schools, religious centres and mosques. Announced in November 2017, the Salvation Government consists of eleven ministries: interior, justice, *awqaf*, education, higher education, agriculture, economy, societal affairs and displaced persons, residence and building, local administration, and health. Similar to other entities affiliated with HTS, the Salvation Government portrays itself as an independent civilian authority. However, the latter is widely viewed as a civilian front for HTS, which allows the group to monopolise authority in northwestern territories through nominally independent local bodies and institutions.⁵⁶ Notably, the Salvation Government is comprised largely of officials close to HTS or supporting its ideology, which enforces a strict interpretation of Islamic law. For example, there is a strong belief among locals that the *awqaf* minister Anas Muhammad Bashir al-Mousa is the same person who goes by the alias Bahir al-Shami and served as head of HTS's sharia council.⁵⁷ But even if those two individuals are not the same person, al-Mousa was nonetheless the president of the court of appeal of Jaish al-Fateh, a collection of Islamist armed groups that included HTS (known as Jabhat al-Nusra at the time).⁵⁸ It is fair to suggest he shares the same conservative views as HTS, especially as the group has allowed him to occupy such a sensitive position.⁵⁹

While all ministries allow HTS to assert its influence over local governance across the majority of the northwestern territories, *awqaf* is particularly crucial for HTS's *dawa* activities and so that it maintains influence over local mosques. Prior to the Salvation Government, HTS tried to control mosques in order to maintain direct contact with the masses over which it ruled. In order to exert the requisite level of control, HTS worked systematically to exclude all preachers who did not adhere to its particular reading of Islam, replacing them with hand-picked imams who were directly affiliated with the group. Sometimes, that was done immediately, using coercion; at others, though, the takeover has been more gradual.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, once it has seized control of a mosque, HTS uses Friday prayers in particular to send a unified – and strictly regulated – message, broadcasting its ideological and political position.⁶¹ Interview respondents noted that mosque outreach has been a particularly important factor in HTS's efforts to mobilise the masses against peace talks and ceasefires.⁶²

Through its influence over *awqaf*, HTS seems to be in a better position to increase its influence over local mosques and their imams. According to the Salvation Government, *awqaf* is the main entity in

55 Author interview via Skype with Ayman, a Syrian analyst, February 2019.

56 Author interview via Skype with Khaled, a Syrian journalist, June 2019.

57 Author interview via Skype with Saad, a Syrian journalist, June 2019.

58 Author interview via Skype with Ahmed, a Syrian journalist, February 2018.

59 Author interview via Skype with Ayman, a Syrian analyst, February 2019.

60 Author interview via skype with Orwa Khalifa, a Syrian journalist, February 2018.

61 Author interview via skype with Ali El Yassir, a Middle East analyst focusing on violent extremist groups, February 2018.

62 Author interview via Skype with Mohammed, the coordinator of 24CR, a civil resistance group against extremism, February 2018.

charge of registering, regulating, administering and monitoring the work of all religious institutions in its areas of operations, including sharia schools.⁶³ To that end, awqaf has created a religious institution to train imams for work in mosques and to provide them with sharia courses to ensure that the content of their preaching is in line with the officially endorsed readings.⁶⁴ Likewise, awqaf's directorate for mosque affairs issued a communique to all mosques in its areas of operation, preventing imams who are not appointed or approved by it from preaching or teaching inside their premises. Anyone violating this proclamation, including imams and mosque management, are subject to legal penalties.⁶⁵ As well as this, awqaf has been reportedly trying to direct imams to focus on specific topics during their Friday preaching.⁶⁶ While those regulations are not yet enforced in all areas under HTS's control, it still shows how the latter can use awqaf to prevent rival groups or entities from promoting religious readings that compete or contradict HTS's views.⁶⁷ This was evident when awqaf confiscated the building and equipment of the al-kitab wa al-sina sharia centre in November 2018.⁶⁸ On top of its efforts to control the work of other religious institutions, awqaf is opening public sharia schools and organising *tahfedh* courses and contests in mosques.^{69, 70}

Above has been outlined the semi-formalised media distribution infrastructure that HTS has relied upon to spread its offline propaganda. By outsourcing its public diplomacy through *mudafat*, *du'at al-jihad*, *sawaed al-khir* and the Salvation Government, the group has been able to save resources, specifically by limiting expenditure, thereby becoming a more decentralised – and therefore elusive – target for counter-narrative communication operations.

63 Awqaf, 'About awqaf,' Salvation Government, 28 April 2018, <https://www.syriansg.org/?p=884>, accessed 14 May 2019.

64 Enab Baladi, 'the salvation government establishes sharia center to train Imams, *Enab Baladi*, 5 February 2019, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/280518>, accessed 14 May 2019.

65 Author interview via Skype with Ahmed, a Syrian journalist, February 2018.

66 Enab Baladi, 'the salvation government establishes sharia center to train Imams, *Enab Baladi*, 5 February 2019, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/280518>, accessed 14 May 2019.

67 Author interview via Skype with Khaled, a Syrian journalist, June 2019.

68 Author interview via Skype with Mohanad, a Syrian analyst, July 2019.

69 Awqaf, 'A recruiting call for high school sharia teachers,' Salvation Government, 26 August 2018, <https://www.syriansg.org/?p=2031>, accessed 14 May 2019.

70 Awqaf, 'A call for Ramadan tahfish contest,' Salvation Government, 16 May 2018, <https://www.syriansg.org/?p=1004>, accessed 14 May 2019.

Means of Engagement

HTS hosts regular public gatherings and campaigns to forge a connection with local populations and to ensure consensual communication with them. Through these various means of personal engagement, the group conveys its rigid interpretation of Islam to guarantee its outreach activities have a lasting impact.

Due to its preference for a more personal mode of dissemination, HTS's media and dawa officials have frequently organised public dawa gatherings and campaigns. To make these events attractive, HTS mixes its religious lectures with promotional activities, which include *tahfidh* contests, comedy evenings and general knowledge quizzes. At the quizzes, the quiz-masters are renowned for asking deliberately easy questions so that they have a pretext to distribute more rewards and therefore appear to be more generous.⁷¹ Those in attendance receive constant positive reinforcement and are encouraged to sign up to go to more regular classes, a possible first step towards their eventual recruitment.⁷² Beside those promotional activities, HTS uses these gatherings and campaigns to convey its interpretation of Islam and highlight the importance of jihad. While some of these events take place regularly in schools, camps and mosques, others are done as part of specific campaigns to highlight certain messages or achieve particular goals.⁷³

In terms of its objectives, the campaigns and gatherings can generally be divided into three categories: dawa, recruitment and fundraising. To better understand these various types, a case study for each category will be examined in detail:

- **The *infir* [enlist] campaign**, also known by its slogan “Take Up Arms, Do Not Sit Still”, was launched in 2016 by al-Muhaysini and around 300 mobilisers from military or religious backgrounds.⁷⁴ The goal of the campaign, according to Muhaysini, is to attract around 3,000 new mujahideen, teaching them sharia and arming the best ones to send them into battle.⁷⁵ In order to achieve the widest distribution possible, thousands of leaflets were printed and several social media accounts were created to promote the campaign. In addition, the recruiters organised public gatherings in the streets, mosques and even schools.⁷⁶ These events often started with a fiery speech by al-Muhaysini or others, highlighting the crimes committed by the Assad regime and the involvement of Shiite militias in killing Sunni Muslims. Likewise, the speech would highlight the virtues of martyrdom before imploring young people to join the jihadists. The ceremonies ended by asking men to sign up and commit themselves to the jihad against Assad. While the campaign targeted all willing men over the age of 15, it specifically focused on young men and adolescents, especially among

⁷¹ Author interview via Skype with Orwa Khalifa, a Syrian journalist, February 2018.

⁷² Author interview via Skype with Ahmed, a Syrian journalist, February 2018.

⁷³ Author interview via Skype with Yassir, a Syrian journalist, February 2019.

⁷⁴ Author interview via Skype with Ibrahim, a Syrian journalist, February 2019.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ Author interview via Skype with Ibrahim, a Syrian journalist, February 2019.

displaced people living in camps.⁷⁷ According to various sources the campaign managed to recruit between 1,500 and 3,000 people, the majority of whom were teenagers.⁷⁸ However, only a small number of those were armed and started fighting, while the rest attended sharia courses and were then sent home. Notably, HTS was not the only group benefiting from the new recruits, but it is widely believed that the latter benefited the most from the campaign in terms of both number and quality of recruits.⁷⁹

Furthermore, these types of gatherings and campaigns are being organised by religious scholars, some of whom are only loosely affiliated with HTS. The group's scholars are also organising similar gatherings (namely in the streets, camps, religious centres and mosques) in order to mobilise new recruits. Such events are largely organised by the group's military *du'at* [preachers] who largely focus on mobilisation and recruitment.⁸⁰ In terms of their target group, the military *du'at* seem to focus on two categories:

1. HTS fighters who attend religious sessions when they join the group, during their *ribat* [guard duty] or before military offensives;
2. the local population in mosques and public gatherings, who are educated on the importance of jihad by scholars typically wearing military outfits and carrying their rifles, with the aim of mobilising or recruiting them.⁸¹

The scholars usually set out five conditions for interested applicants: attendees should be fully available to partake in jihad, single and over 16 years old, have no existing injuries, participate in religious and military courses, and be of good character and reputation.⁸²

- **The *Ma'n ilaa al-jana* [Together to Heaven] campaign** was directly organised by HTS's dawa centres in June 2018 in order to preach to people about the importance of complying with sharia laws in all aspects of daily life. To that end, the official objectives of the campaign, according to the group's news network Ebaa, are:

1. reminding Muslims of what the religious aspects they forget about in their religion are;
2. organising dawa contests in order to attract the younger generation;
3. bringing joy to the hearts of Muslims.⁸³

In its first phase, which lasted throughout the holy month of Ramadan, the campaign organisers conducted 20 public dawa gatherings in the streets, targeting over 16,000 people, distributing 1,400 rewards and providing over 8,000 meals.⁸⁴ The second phase of the campaign repeated the same activities in July 2018, but on top of its activities in northern Syria the campaign widened

77 Author interview via Skype with Mohanad, a Syrian analyst, July 2019.

78 Author interview via Skype with Ibrahim, a Syrian journalist, February 2019.

79 Author interview via Skype with Ibrahim, a Syrian journalist, February 2019.

80 Ebaa Network, 'Graduation ceremony of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's military dawa scholars,' *Ebaa Network*, 15 December 2018, <https://videos.ebaa.news/watch/yVBStf6Y1lfr68F>, accessed 15 June 2019.

81 Author interview via Skype with Ibrahim, a Syrian journalist, February 2019.

82 Author interview via Skype with Ayman, a Syrian analyst, February 2019.

83 Ebaa Network, 'The key achievements of *Ma'n ilaa al-jana* campaign,' *Ebaa Network*, 19 June 2018, <https://ebaa.news/infographic/2018/06/3842/>, accessed 15 June 2019.

84 *ibid.*

its outreach to target the southern province of Daraa, which was the last remaining rebel-held area outside the northwest.⁸⁵ The final stage of the campaign took place in September 2018 and focused mainly on rural areas, displacement camps and prisons. In that phase, the camping reportedly depended on three teams, which managed to organise 50 gatherings over 30 days with a daily target of 1,200 people.⁸⁶ On top of the dawa campaigns directly organised by HTS, its affiliate centres or bodies, namely *du'at al-jihad*, organise similar activities. Notably, multiple sources on the ground have stated that the frequency of such activities has significantly decreased in the past year. It seems that HTS's military victories against its rebel opponents have managed to eliminate their ability to compete ideologically, which reduces the need for such dawa activities.⁸⁷ Similarly, locals have reportedly lost interest in such gatherings, which may help to explain the reduction in their numbers. Consequently, such campaigns mainly take place during Ramadan.⁸⁸

- **The *jahed bi-malak* [wage jihad with your money] campaign** is typically the title of choice for many of the fundraising efforts organised to support jihadi groups fighting in northern Syria. The latest one was led by HTS's affiliate Salvation Government's *wizarat al-awqaf* in July 2019. The official aim of the campaign, as described by its spokesperson, was to collect donations to support ongoing operations to repel the regime-led offensive in Idlib and Hama. More specifically, the money was for buying fuel, food and ammunition, to finance the maintenance of the military and to reinforce vehicles and equipment.⁸⁹ On top of promoting the campaign's poster and donation instructions online, namely via Telegram, WhatsApp and Facebook, the organisers usually create donation stations and organise events in mosques. Likewise, they conduct visits to merchants and wealthy individuals to encourage them to donate money. To incite the latter to contribute, the names of individuals who donate big amounts are usually published on social media, which is seen as self-promotion for the donors.⁹⁰ In terms of beneficiaries, the campaigns that are not directly organised by HTS generally claim that they do not collect donations for a specific group, but rather all groups involved in the fighting. However, many locals believe that HTS is usually the one getting the lion's share of these campaigns.⁹¹ According to the US government, "Al-Muhaysini has played a crucial role in providing financial aid to al-Nusra Front. Between 2013 and 2015, al-Muhaysini raised millions of dollars to support al-Nusra Front governance efforts in Idlib Province, Syria. As of early October 2015, "al-Muhaysini had set up institutions providing financial aid to terrorist groups, including a highly successful campaign that he claimed had secured \$5 million in donations to arm fighters."⁹²

85 Ebaa Network, 'masajidona thabatona phase of Ma'n ilaa al-jana campaign,' *Ebaa Network*, 9 June 2018, <https://ebaa.news/visuals/report-vid/2018/07/5652/>, accessed 16 June 2019.

86 Ebaa Network, 'The third phase of Ma'n ilaa al-jana campaign,' *Ebaa Network*, 6 September 2018, <https://ebaa.news/infographic/2018/09/13128/>, accessed 16 June 2019.

87 Author interview via Skype with Sultan, a Syrian researcher, June 2019.

88 *ibid.*

89 Ebaa Network, 'Interviewing the organiser of jahed bi-malak campaign,' *Ebaa Network*, 19 June 2019, <https://ebaa.news/press-interview/2019/06/45079/>, accessed 20 June 2019.

90 Author interview via Skype with Ayman, a Syrian analyst, February 2019.

91 Author interview via Skype with Samer, a Syrian analyst, February 2019.

92 US Department of State, 'Country Reports on Terrorism 2016,' *U.S. Department of State*, 19 July 2017, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2016/>, accessed 21 June 2019.

While the frequency of such dawa campaigns and gatherings has been significantly reduced due to a lack of ideological competition, these means of engagement remain crucial for the group's offline outreach activities, especially during important religious occasions (such as Ramadan) or political and military events.

Restricting the Flow of Information

Instead of adopting a totalitarian approach towards censorship, which likeminded groups tend to do by banning anything not published by the group, HTS has been both less ambitious and more cautious, preferring to preserve relationships through more targeted negative measures.

Aware of its inability to ban external or rival channels of communication, whether at once or gradually, HTS has tended to be more cautious about when and how to apply censorship in its areas of operation. As such, its efforts became more selective – only certain individuals, groups and forms of communication are targeted by its censors. The precise details of how it engages in its restriction measures are difficult to discern, but locals believe that the group has its own specialised apparatus – informally referred to as the *fira' al-ma'lumat* (literally, “information branch”) – which monitors the media distributed in its immediate sphere of influence.⁹³ According to interview respondents in northern Syria, this unit determines what does and does not get circulated in HTS's territory.⁹⁴

Notwithstanding the existence of this unit, HTS is significantly more permissive than likeminded groups. For example, it has long allowed dozens of pro-uprising newspapers and magazines to be circulated in its territories, publications over which it has no direct oversight whatsoever. While it frequently levels accusations of secularism at them, it only bans those that criticise it specifically or threaten its ideological hegemony. One of those banned was the *Enab Baladi* newspaper, which was cut off in January 2017 after it published an article criticising the group for dominating Idlib and thus providing a pretext for the regime to attack the city.⁹⁵ Furthermore, back in early 2015, at a time when HTS still referred to itself as Jabhat al-Nusra, it famously banned a series of other pro-revolution newspapers, among them *Sada al-Sham*, *Tamaddun* and *Souriatna*, after they published a message of solidarity with the murdered journalists of *Charlie Hebdo*.⁹⁶

After accusing them of attacking Islam, the group confiscated and incinerated all the editions it could access, framing this act as an attempt to defend the interests of the religion.⁹⁷ It is worth noting that the editors of the “offending” newspapers considered this action to be a cynical effort opportunistically to leverage local people against channels of information that were unsympathetic to its cause.⁹⁸ In the

93 Author interview via Skype with Ahmed, a Syrian journalist, February 2018.

94 *ibid.*

95 Enab Baladi, 'The administration of Bab al-Hawa crossing confiscates Enab Baladi newspaper because of an article criticising al-Nusra', *Enab Baladi*, 31 January 2017, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/128318>, 14 June 2019.

96 al-Souria Net, 'al-Nusra executes a second woman on charges of prostitution and Ahrar al-Sham confiscates pro-opposition newspapers', *al-Souria Net*, 20 January 2015, <https://www.alsouria.net/content/النصرة-تعدم-امرأة-ثانية-بتهمة-الدعارة-وأحزاب-الشام-تصادر-صحف-المعارضة>, accessed 12 June 2019.

97 Enab Baladi, 'The administration of Bab al-Hawa crossing confiscates Enab Baladi newspaper because of an article criticising al-Nusra', *Enab Baladi*, 31 January 2017, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/128318>, accessed 16 June 2019.

98 Syria Untold, 'Syrian newspapers attacked for standing with Charlie Hebdo victims', *Syria Untold*, 27 January 2015, <http://www.syriauntold.com/ar/2015/01/تشارلي-يتسبب-بإدراق-صحف-سورية-حرية-الت-27>, accessed 16 May 2019.

context of radio stations, HTS is less ambivalent. It has, for example, raided a number of rival broadcasters in northern Syria after accusing them of committing acts forbidden under Islam. In January 2016, it stormed the facilities of *Radio Fresh*, a station run by local activists in the town of Kafranbal.⁹⁹ In its immediate aftermath, the station was taken off the air, its manager was arrested, its electronic/digital equipment confiscated and the archives were wiped clean, all under the pretext that it had been broadcasting “immoral” programmes with female announcers and music.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, HTS and its affiliates have occasionally made scathing criticism of its rival news platforms, namely the pro-political opposition and Free Syrian Army outlets. Using their social media channels on Telegram, Facebook and WhatsApp groups, both HTS and Ebaa have systematically tried to undermine the credibility of the UAE-based Orient TV and question its editorial line. Orient was accused of becoming a hostile station that incites against the Syrian revolution and turns locals against mujahideen.¹⁰¹ The attack against Orient TV seems to have started in response to a report produced by the channel accusing HTS of assassinating prominent activists Raed Fares and Hammoud Juneid, who were shot dead in the town of Kafranbel, in the south of Idlib.¹⁰²

Likewise, HTS and Ebaa launched a similar campaign criticising the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) and questioned its impartiality. In a video released by Ebaa, the network accused SOHR of “manipulating information” and “deliberately lying” in its coverage of events in Syria. It also accused SOHR of justifying the Russian shelling against opposition areas by ignoring casualties among civilians and reporting that only military targets were hit. Ebaa also highlighted the religious background of the website’s founder, who is an Alwaite – the same sect that the head of the Syrian regime belongs to – seeking thus to undermine the platform’s integrity.¹⁰³

Beside these efforts, HTS has also competed for visual dominance in northern Syria. It has become an extravagant producer of billboards, signposts and posters, and has attempted to make its iconography ubiquitous throughout its territories. As one respondent reported to the author, “when you only see one logo all over the place, you unconsciously start assuming the dominance of that group.”¹⁰⁴ To this end, it has systematically worked to erase any symbols or signs of which it disapproves, regardless of whether those were “un-Islamic” or because they were deemed to be an ideological threat to the group and its leaders.¹⁰⁵ Subversive anti-HTS slogans – many of which manifest covertly overnight – are immediately expunged and replaced with pro-HTS slogans, as are posters and billboards produced by rival organisations fighting for the same goals.¹⁰⁶ As well as banning printing presses, HTS frequently defaces the billboards of Hizb

99 Mustafa Hussien, ‘Radio Fresh suspends its broadcasting due to threats from al-Nusra’, *Smart-News Agency*, 16 June 2016, <https://smartnews-agency.com/ar/wires/180658/راديو-فرش-يعلق-عمله-بسبب-تهديدات-النصرة-و>, accessed 15 May 2019.

100 *ibid.*

101 Ebaa Network, ‘Aboud is partnering with criminals’, *Ebaa Network*, 6 February 2019, <https://ebaa.news/visuals/2019/02/29948/>, accessed 20 June 2019.

102 Tili Blis, ‘The assassination of Raed al-Fares and Mahmoud Junied in Kafranbel’, *Orient News*, 23 November 2018, <http://o-t.tv/yrk>, accessed 19 May 2019.

103 Ebaa Network, ‘The Syrian observatory’s deceiving approach’, *Ebaa Network*, 16 December 2018, <https://videos.ebaa.news/watch/yIVsPZooXZbmrpc>, accessed 17 June 2019.

104 Author interview via Skype with Mustafa, a freelance trainer focusing on peace building, July 2017.

105 Haid Haid, ‘Resisting Hayat Tahrir al-Sham: Syrian Civil Society on the Frontlines’, *Adopt a Revolution*, 10 November 2017, https://www.adoptrevolution.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017_11_10-HTS_Studie-eng.pdf, accessed 02 May 2019.

106 *ibid.*

ut-Tahrir, a group that is also operating in northern Syria with the aim to re-instate sharia law and re-establish the Islamic caliphate.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, HTS has systematically targeted Hizb ut-Tahrir's members in various areas due to their *dawa* activities.¹⁰⁸

In sum, through gradualist and selective censorship, HTS and its antecedents have worked systematically to become one of the few hegemonies in northern Syria's information landscape. While it remains far out of reach of a true information monopoly, the targeted damage it has inflicted upon the public discourse in its territories is likely to have lasting consequences.

¹⁰⁷ Author interview via Skype with Mustafa, a freelance trainer focusing on peace building, February 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Author interview via Skype with Saad, a Syrian journalist, June 2019.

Conclusion

As this paper has shown, HTS has been more successful than other violent jihadi groups in using in-theatre propaganda and public diplomacy to increase its influence and popularity. Although its offline outreach operations are generally split between consumed and performative propaganda, the relative weight of each category differs significantly. HTS has invested a significant amount of time to spread its ideological principles and sociopolitical values through long-term education and outreach activities. Therefore, understanding how HTS uses its offline strategic communication is a necessary step towards countering the group and its ideology. While it is beyond the scope of this study to propose a comprehensive strategy for mitigating this threat, the paper has highlighted three key aspects that practitioners and policy-makers should pay attention to when planning effective ideological countermeasures against HTS and likeminded groups.

While studying the propaganda HTS disseminates over the internet can still be important and relevant, it should not distract experts' attention from HTS's offline outreach, which poses an even greater challenge to Syria's future. A 2012 interview with an HTS former commander, a man named Abu Adnan who was a sharia law official, gives a glimpse into how the group has historically viewed propaganda. In it, he states, "We don't care about the press. It's not a priority to us."¹⁰⁹ In practice, this doctrine means that instead of flooding online spaces with a constant torrent of propaganda HTS portrays itself, through its in-theatre activities, to be interested in action more than words. Therefore, focusing on HTS's online propaganda alone to analyse the scale and content of the group's activities can be misleading, especially when the group seems consciously to decrease its online presence in an attempt to appear modest, thereby further amplifying its credibility.

HTS's offline outreach operations have tended to rely heavily on already-extant structures and institutions, which continue to operate semi-autonomously and rarely fall under the group's official authority. The group has even tried to distance itself from its semi-formalised media distribution infrastructure, namely the Ebaa news network and its dawa and guidance offices. This approach aims to enable its proxy media officials to propagandise on its behalf while themselves masquerading as independent actors. Furthermore, by outsourcing its public diplomacy through *mudafat*, *du'at al-jihad*, *sawaed al-khir* and the Salvation Government, the group has been able to limit its expenditure. Likewise, it desires to become a more decentralized – and therefore elusive – target for counter-narrative communication operations. Therefore, when examining HTS offline outreach, it is important to focus not only on its official institutions but also on other likeminded structures that are either propagandising on its behalf or simply advertising the group's rigid interpretation of Islam.

¹⁰⁹ Rania Abouzeid, 'Interview with Official of Jabhat al-Nusra, Syria's Islamist Militia Group,' *Time Magazine*, 25 December 2012, <http://world.time.com/2012/12/25/interview-with-a-newly-designated-syrias-jabhat-al-nusra/>, accessed 10 May 2019.

This paper has shown that HTS's outreach approaches and priorities are flexible and constantly subject to change. During the early years of the group's formation in Syria (namely between 2011 until mid-2013), the group adopted a very ambiguous publicity strategy, often failing to claim attacks, and spread religious propaganda largely via CD recordings between fighters. Its media approach shifted in the following years towards countering the proclaimed Islamic State doctrine and ideology and expanding its consumed and performative propaganda. Towards that end, it established dawa centres and mobilised its sharia scholars to spread its ideology, to recruit people and to steer public discourse through long-term education and mosque outreach. Since the beginning of 2018, most of the group's online and offline communication has been focused on the institutional consolidation of governance functions and civilian offices, which revolves much less around ideological promises. Consequently, most of its propaganda output draws on civilian issues such as governance and service provision, while the rest focuses on military and security operations, as well as adversary delegitimisation. Dawa preaching seems to get a limited amount of attention. Therefore, developing a strategy to counter only HTS's religious narratives will hardly be successful or effective. Instead, those involved should develop a better understanding of the various other narratives the group uses to increase its legitimacy, credibility and popularity, which can then be used to develop a comprehensive, multi-strategy approaches.

Increasingly, in today's wars, strategic communication operations come to be the decisive battlespace. For that reason, far more research needs to be conducted on their use in-theatre. The above pages, which are just an initial step towards filling this gap, indicate the scale of the mass-indoctrination operations that have emerged in Syria in recent years, emphasising their cumulative impact, which is not likely to evaporate, even after the organisation is militarily defeated or disintegrates gradually.



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