

Journey to Idlib: An Interview with Wassim Nasr, Journalist, France24

By Paul Cruickshank

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Editor's Note: *Between April 29 and May 2, 2023, Wassim Nasr traveled to the Idlib Province of Syria on a reporting assignment for French public broadcaster France24. During his time there, he spoke to senior figures within Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), including the group's leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani and senior ideologue Abu Mariya al-Qahtani. His reporting from Idlib was broadcast and published by France24 on May 11.*¹

CTC: How did this trip come together?

Nasr: I started working on this [visit] in 2020. And it could have happened then, but there was the murder of a French teacher who was beheaded in October 2020, Samuel Paty. His killer, a Frenchman of Chechen origin, had some contacts with a Tajik fighter in the ranks of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) at the time.² As you can imagine, things were halted from our side because France24 didn't want to send me there because of this issue. The group told me at the time that it had nothing to do with the attack. And this is when [in early 2021] PBS got the interview of al-Julani.³

So, by the autumn of 2020, contacts were already seriously established in order to make a trip to Idlib. We kept talking, and then there was an opportunity to go there. So I had to, as you can imagine, organize things with the Turkish side and organize things with HTS, and such preparations always take a long time. But then the 'go' comes fast, and you have to be fast. And so I grabbed the chance to go there.

I did not request to meet al-Julani ahead of time. What interested me intellectually and as someone following these issues for 10 years was the shift that I was seeing from afar and through pieces that were written by Aaron Zelin in *CTC Sentinel*⁴ and by the International Crisis Group on the evolving situation in Idlib, by contacts I have with people there. I wanted to see for myself what was happening. Not the military effort or foreign fighters, but the administration of the territory, justice, education, hospitals, prisons. At the same time, we were witnessing a shift in al-Julani's speech, a shift in Abu Maria al-Qahtani's speech—with a new emphasis put on fighting the Islamic State, fighting al-Qa`ida, etc., etc.

At first, the idea was to bring a camera, but HTS were very wary. They preferred that I talk with them off camera, as it was a first visit.

CTC: How did you get into Idlib from Turkey?

Nasr: I went through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, which is held actually by the Turks on both sides. There is a military road for Turkish military, etc. Going through this was easy because they knew I was coming. I didn't just show up on the border with my French passport and say, 'Let me in.' So it was quite smooth.

Turkish humanitarian relief workers drove me by van to the HTS side. I was the only one crossing the border. The HTS border people said, 'What are you doing here?' I explained in Arabic, and within a minute, the media guys from the Salvation Government that governs HTS-controlled areas of Idlib greeted me and escorted me to their media office. They did not have guns and were dressed in civilian attire. I think that was done on purpose. During my entire stay, I didn't see people with Afghani outfits. I hardly even saw people with military outfits. After spending time in the media office, we went to lunch at a restaurant called Disneyland. We were joined by a personality from the media office of HTS, and the talk became more in-depth.

Then we drove through a couple of checkpoints to get into the city of Idlib, and one thing that really struck me was the flags of the Syrian revolution were fluttering everywhere and that no one was dressed in jihadi attire. Fighters were not present. Entering the city, there was only one classic white Islamic flag with the Shahada written in black. This is different to how you might imagine things looking given HTS' predecessor organization Jabhat al-Nusra was affiliated with al-Qa`ida and jihadi groups have tended to view nationalist symbols as unacceptable. My first thought was 'it's the Potemkin thing.' They're showing me what they want me to see. But as I toured the city and its various neighborhoods, it became clear to me that this display was not just for my benefit. At the end of the day, I was just a journalist, without a television camera. The same spectacle greeted us in all the towns we visited: Sarmada, Dana, Jisr al-Chughur, Ariha, Atmeh, Harem, all over the place. Other than at checkpoints, I saw only one guy on a bike with a Kalashnikov.

I saw men smoking. Women wore either the niqab or just a hijab. There's mixing between men and women in shops and Idlib's many malls and markets. There was separation of men and women in all the restaurants and cafes I went to. I talked to students there that were preparing for their exams. I saw women. I didn't talk to them, but I saw female students as well. Those are interesting indicators.

I asked my escorts about the absence of fighters. They told me, 'We convinced people that there shouldn't be any armed presence in the streets. Those who want to fight, go to the frontlines rather than remaining among civilians in the streets and the shops.' A lot of them told me, 'We don't understand why in the West the army is in the streets. It scares people. Our way to reassure people is not to have military presence in towns and on the streets and in the markets.'

CTC: What freedom of movement and access did you have while you were there?



Wassim Nasr

Nasr: I was always with the representative from the media of the Salvation Government. He didn't tell me, 'You can do this. You can't do that' or tell people what to tell me. But I'm in an atmosphere where you have to be aware of your environment, especially not to put in difficulty the people you talk to. I talked to people in the streets. I talked to people in the camps. I talked to people in restaurants and shops.

CTC: How did you end up meeting al-Julani?

Nasr: We quickly decided to go to Harem on the border with Turkey, from where you can see a very old beautiful medieval citadel, and I guess that all the way there, they were testing me—see what I'm going to ask for, am I going to be very pushy, do I know my stuff, am I just looking for a scoop. Before setting off for Syria, I had not asked to see al-Julani, but I had made it clear I wanted to speak to people who were able to talk on behalf of HTS in an official capacity. During this time, I think my escorts were assessing whether they should allow me to meet al-Julani.

The second night, they called me and said, 'We're going to take you for tea.' I understood that I was going to see someone prominent. On the way, they were like, 'OK, you have to leave your phones in this car. We'll leave this car in this neighborhood, and we'll go to another neighborhood.' And so at that point, I knew I was going to meet Julani because there were no security measures of this kind previously. The whole time up till that point, I had my phone on me; they never asked me to even turn it off.

CTC: What's going through your head at this point?

Nasr: I sensed the mood change. They got very serious. I was quite OK with it because I knew that I didn't have a camera. I'm alone, which is actually very good because if you have someone else with you who doesn't speak the language who's holding the camera, you

have to monitor them. I wasn't stressed at all. They, however, were stressed because they were taking me to see the boss after having, I guess, vouched for me. So they were more stressed than me because if I'm not up to it, they're going to be blamed.

We arrived at a residential area in the city of Idlib, where I was greeted by one of his people who said, 'We are not fond of talking to experts in global jihad,' but the conversation took a normal path afterwards. My conversation with al-Julani was off the record but afterwards they said I could state that I saw him.

I talked for an hour and a half with al-Julani. The spirit of what he said, if you want to know, is available publicly, most of it, including in his latest public announcement at Eid that he made with prominent figures and representatives from Idlib.^a So it was really open, and I guess it was open because he knew he wasn't being filmed and he understood that I know my stuff.

CTC: What was your impression of al-Julani?

Nasr: Sharp. I don't know if it was because of the absence of the camera, but he was straightforward. At the beginning, of course, he also tested me. We ended up talking about the era of 2013, 2014. He knew that I've been following all these issues since then, so his attitude changed a little bit. He was really straightforward. He was dressed as a civilian: jeans and a black shirt, [Hugo] Boss. I don't know it's a fake or a real one, but it was a black Boss shirt with the logo in white. Very short hair. There was one person with us at the beginning, and then we were left one to one. So even the people who were with me at the beginning stayed away. And so it was really an open discussion. The impression he made is that he knows what he wants, and he knows that he has weaknesses, but also that he has some cards that he can play—regarding, for example, Ankara and Damascus.

As I think he's made clear on other occasions, he doesn't draw a line between the fighting that is going on in Syria with Russia and the regime in Syria and the fighting ongoing in Ukraine and views both as the product of Russia's unchecked aggression in the years after 2014-2015. He and his group are no longer committed to whatever is meant by international jihad, that was crystal clear; they consider that it "only brought destruction and failure to their communities."

CTC: So, without going into specifics of what he said, he made very clear during the time he spent with you that his group has moved completely away from global jihad?

Nasr: Absolutely. Not only him. Later during my trip, I also met [HTS senior ideologue] Abu Maria al-Qahtani, and he made the same thing clear to me on the record. And that's intellectually really one of the things that pushed me to go there. Because it's a unique development. You have a core jihadi group with core leaders

^a Editor's Note: Among various things Abu Muhammad al-Julani stressed in a Q&A released to mark the Eid al-Fitr celebration at the end of Ramadan in April 2023 was that, when it came to implementing sharia, it should not be a case of "a man with a stick running behind people." He also stated: "We do not want to impose anything that is not commonly agreed upon to be haram [forbidden]." Abu Muhammad al-Julani et al., "Eid Greetings to the representatives and working forces in the liberated areas," Amjad (HTS media outlet), circa April 21, 2023 (translation by Wassim Nasr).

saying, ‘OK, we don’t want anything to do with international jihad anymore.’ This is unique. It’s never happened before.

CTC: Talk to us about your interview with Abu Maria al-Qahtani.

Nasr: I was the first journalist to meet him, ever. He had not even been interviewed by an Arab journalist before. I met him at another location the day before I left. He came to me. There were again security measures. A car came, checked the place, then another car came, and he was in the second car.

He is in charge, in an unofficial way, of the fight against Islamic State and al-Qa`ida. He’s the man. He was very clear. He said, ‘We are preventing our youth from joining the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida. Not only by force, but also by convincing them and by showing them that we have a system which is viable and able to work.’ You can’t get clearer than this, and actually I was surprised not only that he said it but that he also told me, ‘You can say it on record. You can say that you saw me, too.’ I wasn’t expecting this actually, but he insisted on it, like ‘I have a message to get through.’

CTC: What was your impression of al-Qahtani?

Nasr: He’s tall. He’s a big guy. You realize that with age, he understood things. He was like, ‘We made mistakes. We have been living in wars for decades. I spent my youth in war, and now we are looking for something else. We don’t want to fight the West. We even want to fight those who want to target the West from our area. Help us out.’ That was his message.

But of course, we’re not talking about democratic and liberal parties. They’re still very conservative. They are still Islamist. But they are less radical than the Taliban, for example, to make a comparison. Women go to school, women drive, you see people smoking in the street. Of course, they far from espouse democratic values or those of a liberal free society, but it’s a shift. And as you know, when you have radical groups, when you see a shift, you have to assess it and take it into consideration. Otherwise, the most radical in the group will have the heaviest weight. Even in their ranks, you see that, for example, on the issue of Christians, there is still resistance inside the group: What should be done? What shouldn’t be done? How far can the group go in accommodating minorities? And each step they take towards treating minorities better is very costly for them in terms of creating internal criticism.

CTC: Did al-Qahtani elaborate on his August 2022 call for al-Qa`ida to be dissolved?^b

Nasr: He said, ‘I called in the open’—the open for them, among their groups—‘for the dissolution.’ He told me, ‘I even reached out

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to al-Qa`ida in Yemen and told them you have to stop.’ And he told me, ‘Especially because now if the head of al-Qa`ida is Saif al-`Adl in Iran, what’s the point? We don’t want our Sunni organization to be led by Iran, so there’s no point in it.’^c He told me to go public with this.

CTC: This is a remarkable turnaround because up until 2016, HTS’ predecessor group Jabhat al-Nusra was a very powerful part of al-Qa`ida.⁵ Now HTS is presenting itself as involved in counterterrorism. As Aaron Zelin has documented in *CTC Sentinel*, the group has quite aggressively gone after the Islamic State in Idlib.⁶

Nasr: Yes. We can think, ‘OK, it’s just to please the Western public.’ But that’s what is really being said there on the ground and not just by the top leaders including Abu Maria Qahtani. Others that I spoke to made me understand that they came to the conclusion that the al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State projects “aren’t viable projects.” So they have to find something else—more political, more in coherence with the aspirations of the populations. And this is also why it was interesting for me to go there because it could be a way or a path that could be taken in other areas of conflict, like the Sahel, for example. The interesting thing is that it’s all new. We don’t know where it’s going to go. And this is why it’s very interesting and especially coming from people who had high responsibilities. We’re not talking about people who made defections on a low-ranking level saying, ‘Oh no, al-Qa`ida was bad.’ We’re talking about commanders such as Julani and Qahtani who had responsibilities in the Islamic State of Iraq and in—as you said—one of the most

^b As documented by the researcher Cole Bunzel in August 2022, “Abu Mariya al-Qahtani, a senior leader in Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), delivered a controversial message on his Telegram channel. The time had come, he wrote, for al-Qa`ida’s branches to shut the organization down. After the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri on July 31, 2022, and with the question of succession complicated by the leading candidate’s presence in Iran, this was the best path forward. He urged the affiliates to consider an alternative model of jihadism, one that embraces cooperation with regional states as part of a strategy of confronting ‘the Iranian project’ in the Middle East.” Cole Bunzel, “Dissolve al-Qa`ida”: The Advice of Abu Mariya al-Qahtani,” *Jihadica*, August 24, 2022.

^c Editor’s Note: Abu Mariya al-Qahtani reiterated this in a message he subsequently posted on Telegram on May 14, 2023. In this message, he stated: “Some people blame me because of the words I said a month ago about the news of Saif al-`Adl assuming leadership of al-Qa`ida, for I had said that he was a prisoner in Iran, how could he communicate with the branches, learn the secrets of the [battle] fields, hold the reins of affairs, and command, knowing that his condition is as we know? ... I again direct my call to the [al-Qa`ida] branches to prioritize the interest of the umma, which is engaged in its battle with the Safavids in more than one arena, and to disengage from their association with al-Qa`ida [as] Saif al-`Adl has become the one who runs it while he is in captivity under the authority of the Revolutionary Guards. He is unable - at minimum - to declare everything he believes in, not to mention giving orders that might be detrimental to the interests of the Iranians.” Abu Mariya al-Qahtani, “A Message to the Sane People Regarding Disengagement from al-Qa`ida,” Telegram, May 14, 2023.



Idlib town with Islamist and revolutionary flags in view (Wassim Nasr)

powerful branches of al-Qa`ida, and today, they are saying, ‘That was a mistake.’

CTC: Did any of the HTS figures you spoke to bring up or acknowledge al-Zawahiri’s death?

Nasr: No, not directly, but, as I told you, Qahtani said, ‘If today, Saif al-`Adl is leading al-Qa`ida from Iran,’ which is kind of acknowledging.

And Qahtani said one thing about the Shi`a, too. He said, ‘We don’t have anything against the Shi`a or the minorities, but we are against Iran and Russia, etc., etc.’

CTC: But of course, it is well documented that historically the jihadis in Syria, including Jabhat al-Nusra, were responsible for a lot of atrocities and abuses, including of a sectarian nature over the years.^d It seems the message they were trying to give

^d According to the U.S. State Department, “nonstate actors, including a number of groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United States and other governments, such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN, also known as al-Nusra Front), targeted Shia, Alawites, Christians, and other religious minorities, as well as other Sunnis, with indiscriminate attacks as well as killings, kidnappings, physical mistreatment, and arrests in the areas of the country under their control . . . ISIS required Christians to convert, flee, pay a special tax, or face execution. It destroyed churches, Shia shrines, and other religious heritage sites. ISIS used its own police force, court system, and revised school curriculum to enforce and spread its interpretation of Islam. JAN was responsible for similar executions and punishments, though the number of victims appeared much smaller than the number of ISIS victims. JAN continued to implement policies of forced Islamization in minority communities under its control, particularly among the Druze in Idlib.” “2016 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria, U.S. State Department,” U.S. Department of State, n.d.

to you was that they are trying to turn a new page and moving away from that.

Nasr: Yes. That’s what I saw. The issue of minorities and the Christians was one area I wanted to bring up with them. I had heard they were returning some homes in Idlib to Christians, and I wanted to see if it was for real.^e One day, I was taken to visit with the Christian community in the village of Yacubiyeh. I was the first foreign person and journalist to enter the village in 12 years. I attended a meeting at the reception room of the village church attended by HTS representatives and about 15 elderly Christians from three villages in the area. I quickly understood that the meeting was to talk about the local Christians getting back some of the homes and their lands that are occupied by foreign jihadists and lands that were confiscated by the Nusra Front and even HTS back in 2018. There was a pretty frank exchange of views. One thing that struck me was that when I entered the church, I saw Muslim workers renovating the church. This was meaningful because HTS would not let Muslim villagers come and work in it unless they were okay with the Christians renovating their church.

CTC: So you felt then that this wasn’t just being put on as a show for you, that there is a genuine change here?

Nasr: When we left the church, we went to a monastery, Saint

^e Editor’s Note: Nasr reported for France24 that “HTS claims it has launched a process to return confiscated property to Christians who come forward ‘with the exception of those linked to the Syrian regime . . . So far, several houses have been returned to their rightful owners, some by force.” Wassim Nasr, “Reporter’s notebook: Idlib, the last Islamist rebel bastion in Syria,” France24, May 11, 2023.

Joseph Monastery. The local Christians showed me what they are repairing in the wake of the February 2023 earthquake. If HTS wanted to prevent this, they could have. Because as a jihadi group, you are not allowed to restore and to repair churches when they get destroyed. You are not allowed. I even saw Christian charity; I saw tens of Muslims who were hit by the earthquake that were living in the monastery. Despite all the things that they went through, those Christians are still helping out.

One of the Christians I met told me, “The situation is certainly delicate for us Christians, but it’s been improving for the past two years.” In my reporting for France24, I noted that the fact that the situation has improved has led some to try to bring their family members back to the area.⁷

CTC: When you’re reporting something like this, as a journalist and as a media organization, you have to think very carefully about how you approach it from an editorial point of view. Clearly, you’re meeting a group that has a particular agenda and wants to present a certain face to the world. Clearly this is a group with an extremely problematic back-story in terms of their linkages to a global terror organization responsible for so much murder and mayhem around the world. How did you think through these challenges as you reported this story out for France24?

Nasr: As I always do, by just doing my job properly and by telling the whole story. Each time I talked about them, I said who al-Julani was, what’s his history, who sent him. Among those not tracking these issues closely, few people are aware that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sent him to Syria early on during the Syrian civil war.^f I reminded our readers and viewers when I was writing the piece for France24 and was talking on TV, that the people who burned the churches were Jabhat al-Nusra, headed by al-Julani. And I said that more than one time, so people can still follow the link. He was in charge when those things happened. Today, if he says that there’s been a change, and that it was a chaotic period, OK, but it doesn’t erase what happened.

The effort made by al-Julani today is: ‘We’re going to go back to our Syrian heritage.’ He said, ‘Christians are here [for] more than 1,000 years. This is your land’—a declaration he made in July 2022 during a meeting with Christian representatives. Of course, he’s using minorities as a card. But when you talk to them, to the Christians, they say, ‘We are not totally free, but in the last two years, things have been getting better.’ They told me that three years ago, they had to say mass secretly but now they say mass every day. However, it should be noted that they cannot ring church bells or put crosses on buildings.

To go back to your question of how I work on it as a journalist, what interests me intellectually is that it appears to be an historic shift. But I don’t know where it’s going. Time will tell if it endures and how truly committed they are.

CTC: That’s the big question, right? Can we, as analysts, trust

“I think they have an interest in going away from global jihad. A real interest, in order to govern and to maintain their presence in this region. The fact is that they are fighting al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. The fact is they are not plotting attacks against the West themselves from Idlib. The fact is they are distancing themselves in public and in private from this ideology ... they seem to understand that the global jihad is not a viable way of governance.”

their words, that they’re really, truly distancing themselves from global jihad and going in a new direction, and obviously reporting like this is very important for trying to figure out those kind of questions.

Nasr: I think they have an interest in going away from global jihad. A real interest, in order to govern and to maintain their presence in this region. The fact is that they are fighting al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. The fact is they are not plotting attacks against the West themselves from Idlib. The fact is they are distancing themselves in public and in private from this ideology. Qahtani told me, ‘Our jihad is still real, but our jihad is against the Russians and the Syrian regime to free Syria. Nothing more.’ So they seem to understand that the global jihad is not a viable way of governance. So we have to assess this and see where it will go. At the end of the day, they are labeled as terrorists, but they are not targeted. There’s a reason for that.

CTC: The United States is offering a reward of up to \$10 million for information on al-Julani.⁸ HTS is designated by the United States as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO).⁸ Does HTS have any hope or wish to get removed from some of these designations?

Nasr: Yes. I was there when Abu Ahmad Zakour was designated.⁹ He is the second to Qahtani actually in the fight against the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida. And Qahtani told me, ‘I don’t understand why the Americans and the Turks designated Abu Ahmed Zakour. We are fighting the Islamic State. We are fighting al-Qa`ida. Why are you putting obstacles for us? This is a political scam because they don’t want us to unite the northern free area of Syria, etc., etc.’ He

^f Editor’s Note: In his report for France24, Nasr wrote: “In 2012, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, then-leader of the Islamic State group of Iraq who would later head the IS group, assigned Joulani to Syria along with some of his men to benefit from the contacts and networks his group already had in the country and form a sub-branch called the al-Nusra Front.” Nasr.

^g In May 2018, the U.S. State Department “amended the designation of al-Nusra Front — an al-Qa`ida affiliate in Syria — to include Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other aliases. These aliases [were] added to al-Nusra Front’s designations as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).” “Amendments to the Terrorist Designations of al-Nusra Front, Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State, May 31, 2018.

was affected and emotional about it.

CTC: During your trip, what was the biggest thing that you learned, and what was the biggest thing that surprised you?

Nasr: As I've already noted, the biggest thing that surprised me was the absence of military presence and the presence of fairly vibrant economic activity really. I really wasn't expecting this. That's the thing that surprised me the most. What I learned is that they are quite organized, and they are trying really to create a civil administration.

For example, when it comes to checkpoints, they have a small administration for checkpoints—police, the military branch. So they are really trying to make something from nothing, which means they understood something. In the administration of the Salvation Government, it's mostly civilians. They understood that they have to gain the support of the civilians and the population as the last hope for the revolution. Insurgencies, when they try to, they can begin to settle. It tends to be the case that it's when they govern that they get less radical.

The Salvation government figures I spoke to told me: 'We don't want money. We need the international community to back us politically and to back us with people who have skills to help us build this administration. We are not rebuilding. We're building from zero.'

CTC: What do they want to build? What kind of state? What's their goal as articulated to you and your sense of their ambitions?

Nasr: They want to build a modern Islamist state. They have ministries already, but these offices are small and sometimes empty. There's a will to do something. History is made with moments like this.

Also what I understood from talking with them is that it is difficult also for them to implement all those decisions regarding the requirement for foreign fighters to leave global jihad, accept HTS' legal and military authority, all operate under HTS' banner, as well as decisions regarding getting away from al-Qa`ida, regarding fighting the Islamic State. It is not just showing off for the West to get some money. It is very costly for them internally. So the decision the international community needs to make is, should it help this model to survive or not? That's the thing. At the same time, it's such a mess in Idlib. Who wants to handle the mess? You have four and a half million people there, including one and half million people displaced by force. Who's going to handle them? Turkey? No. Assad? No. France? No. You have foreign fighters. Who's going to handle that? This is a real question, and it's a card in HTS' hand because they are willing to handle these challenges.

CTC: And I guess there's almost like an implicit threat that if they don't handle it, then there could be significant refugee flows into Turkey and into Europe even.

Nasr: Yes. This is why they are being tolerated by Turkey.

CTC: Are they open about holding that card up and saying this is a card that we can play?

“What I saw is the beginning or the premises of a third path, another path that could be useful for the international community to try implement or to build upon in other places. These days, HTS is less radical than the Taliban ... and they might have a more viable model. Of course, again it's important to stress, it's authoritarian; it's not liberal ... But when you have prominent commanders like this who were in the ranks of the Islamic State of Iraq, al-Qa`ida making this kind of shift publicly, people will look at them and say, 'If those people are saying it was a mistake, maybe we should do things another way.'”

Nasr: No, but it's obvious. Why do you think the Turks are tolerating them? Inside the Turkish administrations, there are people who are tolerant with them and people who are against them, because the Turks realize that HTS is handling the issue. And they are handling the issue better than the factions that are on Turkish payroll in other areas. Still HTS is still a designated terrorist group by Turkey.

CTC: There's been a lot of talk about a potential rapprochement between Damascus and Ankara.¹⁰ Did the HTS leaders you met talk about the geopolitical aspect, the possibility that if a deal is eventually reached between them, Turkey may pull back from northwest Syria and the regime of Bashar al Assad might try to move in?

Nasr: We didn't talk about it clearly. I asked the question to Julani, but he didn't answer clearly. And this is how I understood what I just told you, that the power cards that they have are the refugees and the foreign fighters.¹¹ He didn't answer it clearly, but I came out with this conclusion. You have those two cards actually that, even if

^h Editor's Note: In his reporting for France24, Nasr recounted that "both the Islamist and Syrian representatives I met on the ground said it would be difficult 'for Ankara, Moscow and Damascus to impose an agreement that has been negotiated without the HTS.' If they did, it would be perceived as a diktat against not only their interests, but those of the revolution. The HTS holds several strategic cards it can use if it needs to, and still considers itself in a position of strength in its commanding position. One of the most precious cards it holds is the threat of hostilities resuming, which would send a flood of refugees to Turkey — where they are less and less welcome — and in the longer term, potentially also to Europe. Such a surge of refugees would not only consist of civilians but also of local and foreign jihadists, who the HTS up until now has somehow managed to control and contain. Several dozen of the jihadists are French nationals." Nasr.

you don't play them, they're going to play by themselves. If there's a deal between Damascus and Ankara or a big military operation, people are just going to go to Turkey and even maybe to Europe.

CTC: Do you see any parallel with what Hamas have put together in Gaza and what they're trying to do?

Nasr: Yes. I even told them, 'OK, you are making some kind of a Hamas. Without accusing you of being like Hamas, but it's similar.' And actually, it is. It is maybe the way for them to attract human skills in their ranks, Syrians who don't want to be involved with the jihadi movement and don't want to be labeled as working with the jihadi movement.

CTC: When you asked them whether they are aspiring to be like Hamas, what was their reaction?

Nasr: They laughed. That was an informal discussion with some people from the Salvation Government administration.

CTC: HTS clearly has significant sympathy for Hamas. As has been noted in this publication, during a round of hostilities between Hamas and Israel in May 2021, al-Qahtani tweeted out a video of rockets launched by Hamas toward civilian areas in Israel and stated, "These scenes delight the believers."¹¹ Is there anything for our readers who are involved in counterterrorism and thinking through the challenges posed by jihadi groups that came out of the trip that is going to help guide your analysis moving forward?

Nasr: To sum it up, I went there to see things for myself, and what I saw is the beginning or the premises of a third path, another

path that could be useful for the international community to try to implement or to build upon in other places. These days, HTS is less radical than the Taliban—women have access to higher education in universities, for example—and they might have a more viable model. Of course, again it's important to stress, it's authoritarian; it's not liberal. Of course, the freedom of minorities is limited, as in other places. Of course, it's a war zone. But when you have prominent commanders like this who were in the ranks of the Islamic State of Iraq, al-Qa`ida making this kind of shift publicly, people will look at them and say, 'If those people are saying it was a mistake, maybe we should do things another way.'

One more thing to stress: They all told me that their fight is the same fight as the Ukrainians. They said, 'You are fighting the Russians. If you had helped us at the time'—meaning 2013 after the chemical attacks—'maybe things would have gone another way.'¹²

CTC: They're trying to say that they share the same enemies. They feel that they're fighting the same fight as the West.

Nasr: And that their war is not against the West. They will not allow attacks on the West, etc. That's what they said, and it's significant because you are talking about those people—Qahtani, Julani—in command and with this kind of past. **CTC**

ⁱ Editor's Note: According to the U.S. State Department, in August 2013, "the Assad regime released the nerve agent sarin on its own people in the Ghouta district of Damascus, killing more than 1,400 Syrians, many of them children." Despite previously stating that the use of chemical weapons would be a red line, President Obama ultimately decided not to carry out military action against the Syrian regime. "Press Statement: Syria: Eighth Anniversary of the Ghouta Chemical Weapons Attack," U.S. Department of State, August 21, 2021; Ben Rhodes, "Inside the White House During the Syrian 'Red Line' Crisis," *Atlantic*, June 3, 2018.

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- 2 Editor's Note: For reporting on this, see Jean-Michel Décugis and Jérémie Pham-Lê, "'J'ai décapité le prof': le dernier contact du tueur de Samuel Paty identifié en Syrie," *Parisien*, March 8, 2021.
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