

The Emergence of Two Distinct Jihadist Ways of War

Description

On November 27, the jihadist organization [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS) in Syria initiated an offensive against the regime of embattled dictator Bashar al-Assad. In a matter of 11 days, HTS forces advanced more than 50 miles east and 200 miles south from its bases in the northwest Idlib region, seizing the cities of Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and the capital Damascus, overthrowing the Asad regime.

These scenes are reminiscent of the swift conquest of much of Iraq by another jihadist group, the Islamic State (IS), a decade earlier. Units of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) disintegrated as IS fighters swept through Mosul, al-Qaim, Tikrit, Baiji, Sinjar, and other population centers, at its peak occupying about one-third of the country, along with half of Syria. It took US intervention and three years of grueling warfare to deprive IS of its territory in Iraq.

Both IS and HTS—at war with each other since 2013—are offshoots of al-Qaeda, but have developed into distinct entities, each with its own flavor of jihadist ideology, governance styles, and military operations. Indeed, a comparison of the current HTS-led offensive in Syria with the 2014 IS campaign in Iraq illuminates the emergence of two distinct jihadist ways of war.

Aggressive Light Infantry Forces

In [my book](#) on the Islamic State's military effectiveness, I posit that four components of its operations determined effectiveness: innovation, robust shaping operations, initiative, and high determination. The presence of these four factors produced a highly aggressive and mobile military force, composed mostly of light infantry, that struck its enemies hard in their most brittle points. For example, in the June 2014 fall of Mosul (Iraq's second-largest city), mere hundreds of determined IS fighters stormed the city in tandem with preinserted sleeper cells. The defenders disintegrated, hollowed out by years of sectarianism and corruption, and IS exploited its success by pushing additional forces to Mosul quickly and finally capturing it within a week. This was the IS army at its best: shaping the battlefield through infiltrations, assassinations, and sleeper cells, then striking hard at its weakened opponents.

HTS has demonstrated a similar operational approach. Videos filmed by HTS ahead of the assault on Aleppo show significant advances with [armored vehicles](#) as well as pickup trucks and [motorcycles](#). In

one, dismounting fighters [storm](#) the regime's Syrian Arab Army (SAA) trenches. [Analysts reported](#) HTS use of elite reconnaissance and "special forces" type units to direct fires and prepare the way for infantry. Better and more professional training seemed on display, too, likely part of HTS's efforts to professionalize, as exemplified in its 2021 establishment of a military college. A large amount of [captured materiel in good condition](#) and [soldiers](#), coupled with documentation of [retreating regime forces](#), paints a picture of rapid breakdown against HTS strikes on Aleppo. Then, at Hama, HTS fighters met SAA lines north of the city and, [over several days](#), secured its northern, eastern, and western outskirts, precipitating a regime retreat. Jihadist forces wasted no time in quickly extending south to contest Homs and Damascus, keeping the initiative and draining SAA morale.

IS Suicide Bombs, HTS Drones

Both groups also employed firepower to shock and break opposing defensive lines and facilitate infantry assaults. The Islamic State's weapon of choice for the task was the [car bomb](#), or suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED). Human drivers permitted more maneuverability and flexibility, and forward observers and drones could help guide them to their targets, enabling imitation of artillery, armor, or airstrike effects. A massive industrial enterprise and built-up bombmaking know-how sustained the frequent employment of SVBIEDs. Such weapons were also used to eliminate enemy armor or target specific commanders beyond the frontlines.

In the Syrian Civil War's early years, [Jabhat al-Nusra](#), as HTS was known between 2012 and 2016 when it was still affiliated with al-Qaeda, pioneered the use of SVBIEDs in military operations. However, there has been a notable lack of reported SVBIED strikes in the current HTS offensive (except for [this possible sighting](#)). In fact, HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani stated in a 2021 [interview with PBS FRONTLINE](#), "If we had planes, we would have used planes. If we had artillery to replace martyrdom [suicide bombing], we would have saved those brothers."

Instead, there is evidence that HTS is relying on drones and [other projectiles](#) to shock SAA forces. At least one [video](#) showed the impact of an HTS kamikaze drone with a heavy payload. The group also showcased its drone launch and surveillance capabilities in a [propaganda video](#). Other [footage](#) shows the use of first-person view (FPV) drones to hit SAA armor. One analyst [reported](#) the use of FPV drones to hinder SAA counterattacks, as well as for command and control and battle tracking.

Spreading Terror Versus Signaling Restraint

Perhaps the most striking contrast between IS and HTS is their respective information warfare approaches. IS achieved notoriety for its disseminating videos of beheadings, torture, and other brutal

acts while touting its worst atrocities, such as the [Camp Speicher massacre](#) and [enslavement](#) of Yazidis. Such messaging was part of an IS psychological warfare campaign that demoralized opposing forces in advance of the Islamic State's next attack while also encouraging IS supporters. Indeed, IS turned its guns on any outsider who refused to submit to its worldview and offered no quarter for dialogue. This outlook also manifested in the group's relentless expansionism; virtually every entity that touched the Islamic State's borders endured an IS attempt to subdue it.

In contrast, HTS has adopted seemingly conciliatory messaging toward other actors, emphasizing that it is focused exclusively on fighting the Asad regime and its backers. On November 29, HTS released a [statement](#) addressed to the "Syrian People and the International Community" asserting that the offensive is a "battle for justice and dignity, aimed at countering Assad's crimes and the armed militias' use of heavy weaponry against their own people," a campaign to defend the Syrian people against an oppressive regime. It also called on foreign journalists and organizations to "amplify the voices of the Syrian people." In a [statement](#) addressed to his fighters the same day, al-Jolani urged showing "mercy, kindness, and gentleness to our people in Aleppo." Moreover, the group emphasized that it would [offer amnesty](#) to surrendering regime soldiers.

When the jihadists reached Aleppo's Kurdish-majority neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsood, held by the US-backed Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), they did not strike at the SDF as IS likely would have. Instead, HTS [offered](#) to allow the SDF to leave the city with its arms (though the SDF has yet to leave), [affirmed](#) that Kurds are an "integral part" of Syria, and condemned the "barbaric practices" that IS perpetrated against Kurds. The group also addressed reassurance messages to the [Alawite](#) and [Salamiyah](#) Ismaili Shia communities and [called on Iraq](#) and the "Lebanese people" to refrain from intervening. By signaling restraint, HTS avoids provoking foreign powers or other actors in Syria that might be alarmed by its success, a marked contrast with the Islamic State's unabashed brutality.

Although one might interpret these recent messages as an indication of moderation, HTS remains as jihadist as it has always been, albeit of a different flavor from al-Qaeda or IS. A recent HTS [fatwa](#) in Arabic called on Syrians living abroad to return home to "join the ranks of the mujahidin [those who wage jihad]." It has [imposed its version of Islamic law](#) in Idlib for several years now, discriminating harshly against those that do not share its worldview, as in its seizure of property belonging to Christians and Druze and rocketing of Alawite communities. HTS, like other jihadist groups, [rejects democracy](#). The group has [praised](#) the October 7, 2023, Hamas terrorist attack on Israel and eulogized Hamas leaders Yahya Sinwar and Ismail Haniyeh. Hence, one must remain skeptical of al-Jolani's façade of respectability. HTS actions now that it rules will reveal whether it really does mean to change.

Weak Enemies

To a significant extent, IS and HTS both owe some of their military successes to the weakness of their enemies. The Iraqi Army in 2014 was [brittle](#), hollowed out by years of corruption, and collapsed with little resistance against IS. The best ISF units, the US-created special forces formations known as the [Counter-Terrorism Service](#) (CTS), were demoralized since the US withdrawal of 2011 and could not spearhead a serious counteroffensive until the United States reentered in June 2014. Thus, Iraq's lack of foreign support was also a factor in its initial setbacks.

Similarly, SAA defensive lines have swiftly collapsed, with widespread reports of regime soldiers defecting or fleeing. Future research will better illuminate the causes of this collapse, but one expert on the SAA has [pointed to](#) rampant corruption within the army. The [loss of Iranian and Russian military support](#) likewise seems crucial as the regime had come to rely on these foreign backers. The 2015 [Russian intervention in Syria](#) likely saved Asad from defeat at the time and helped him claw back Aleppo and other territories he had lost in the preceding years to IS and rebel groups. Since 2012, Iran had its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and proxy groups like [Hezbollah](#) and the [Fatemiyoun Brigade](#) train and provide sizable ground forces to back up the SAA.

Still, to take advantage of a weak enemy, one must be able to press the advance aggressively, exploit victories, and have intelligence identifying weak points. Both IS and HTS built nimble light infantry forces well-suited to these tasks.

Implications

HTS is now the latest [nonstate actor to deliver a surprisingly effective conventional military campaign](#) against a better-armed state adversary. It has exhibited a distinct way of war, different from past campaigns by IS or other jihadist groups.

With the defeat of the Asad regime, HTS has proven itself the dominant armed faction in Syria and will now have to unite the rest of the country under the jihadist banner by force or otherwise. The United States and our SDF partners should ensure they are prepared to meet the threat should al-Jolani decide to expand further. It is unlikely the jihadist group would entertain sharing power with the secularist SDF, though HTS signaling of restraint could open the door for avoiding armed conflict in the near term. The United States should stand ready to assist the SDF with counter-drone and air support to blunt any determined jihadist assaults, learning from the SAA's defeat. This will be especially important for preserving the SDF as it is fending off Turkish-backed groups [reportedly seizing](#) SDF-held Manbij and now [attacking](#) the strategic Tishreen Dam.

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Main Image: Two destroyed tanks in front of a mosque in Azaz, Syria, 2012 (by Christiaan Triebert, [Flickr](#))

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