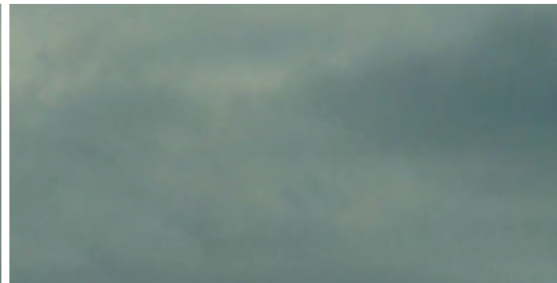
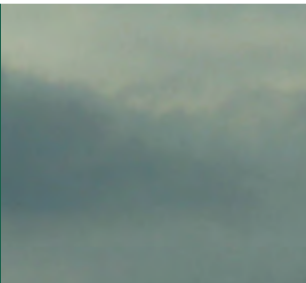




**THE  
STABILISATION  
NETWORK**



# **HTS and Women:**

## **A gendered approach to social influence in Idlib and Dar'a**



Figure 1 : A mosque in Binnish, Idlib Province

**TSN**

**Project Report | May 2018**

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### Research Note

The research and analysis contained in this report is current as of May 2018. At the time of writing, the military situation in Syria is subject to change rapidly, with a high probability of an imminent regime offensive on rebel-held Dar'a. With changes in military realities, the social activities discussed in this report are also subject to change. However, even as details on the ground change, the broader themes discussed throughout the report remain relevant to understanding and predicting HTS's approach to social control.

**TSN, August 2019**

## Executive Summary

**HTS's approach to women – 'Wives and mothers'.** Like other Jihadi groups, HTS views the primary role of women as supporting the realization of a righteous Islamic society through the rallying of support within families. However, in practice, HTS has also allowed limited female participation in public roles. In Idlib, female HTS members participate mainly in indoctrination activities. However, requirements associated with HTS's efforts to administer territory have also necessitated that the group compromise its ideology to include women on a limited scale in HTS-controlled institutions such as courts, prisons, and border control functions. Women in governance and judicial roles may be female HTS members or non-affiliated women. By comparison, women are not believed to be active members of HTS in Dar'a province.

The main agents of HTS's outreach to women are a network of ideologically-committed female preachers. These preachers generally have marital or familial ties to HTS and many are wives of HTS foreign fighters, though Syrian women may now outnumber them in such positions.

**Women and HTS's religious education – 'Small social circles'.** HTS's religious education initiatives for women appear to be mostly ad-hoc, although there are indications the group is attempting to centralize activities under nominally-independent religious institutions. Because of Salafi opposition to any role for women in public life—including in mosques—religious education activities targeting women occur almost exclusively in private spaces such as women's homes, women-only shari'a institutes, and *da'wa* offices. Education at shari'a institutes tends to be offered only in areas under firm HTS control, with the group relying on small private circles in areas where it competes with other factions. During these, women are taught abridged "women's versions" of certain Islamic texts focusing mainly on topics such as the importance of gender separation and proper religious dress.

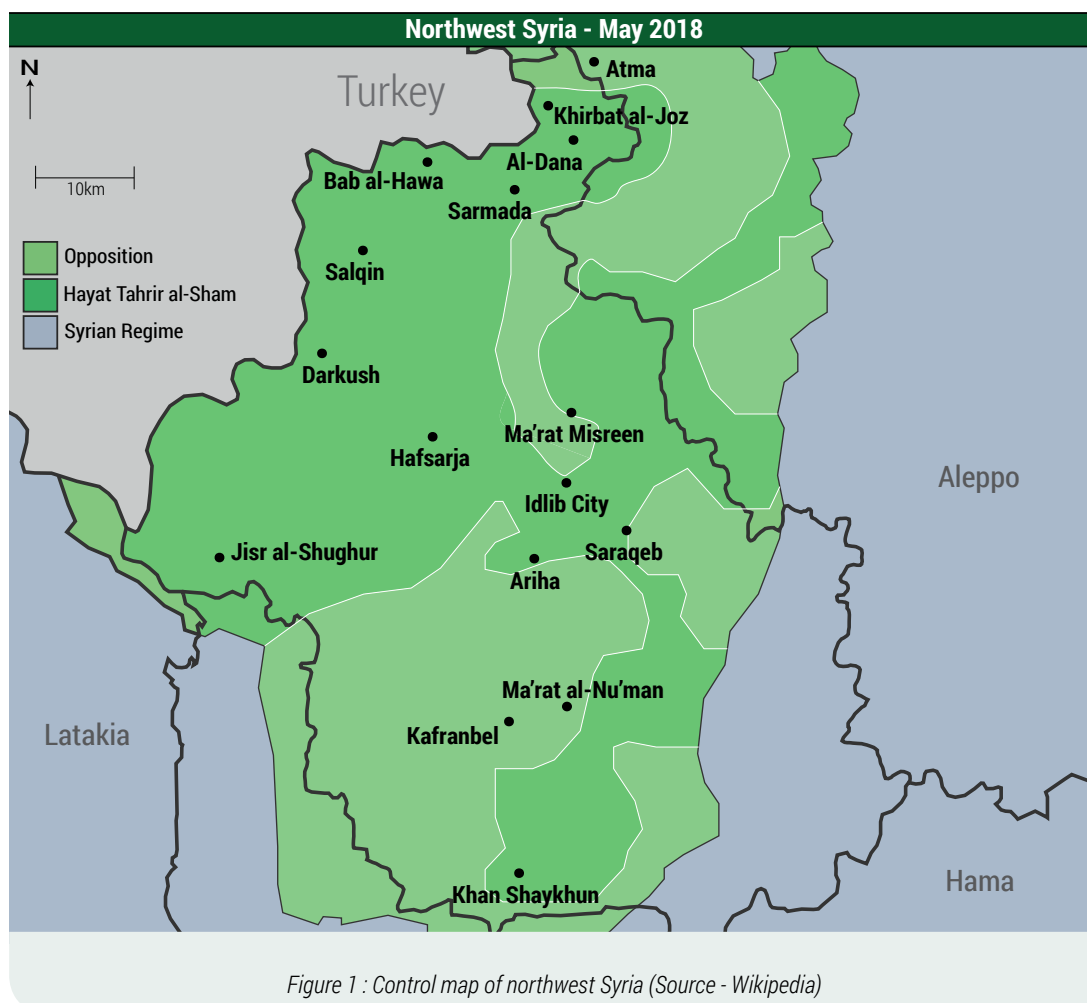
Recruitment of women into religious education generally relies on the immediate networks of family members of HTS fighters. Outside of HTS's familial networks, the group also targets IDP communities, whom HTS is often able to access uncontested. Focus group discussions and interviews indicate women's reasons for participating in such HTS initiatives range from ideological affinity for the group to financial considerations such as access to humanitarian aid and the promise of future employment. For IDPs, participation may also be motivated by a desire for social stability.

**HTS's religious policing of women – 'Hisba'.** In addition to religious education, HTS has adopted a more active and coercive form of religious policing known as Hisba. HTS's Hisba uses intimidation in areas frequented by women such as schools and markets to compel women's public obedience to the group's restrictive religious norms, such as gender segregation and conservative religious dress. HTS's Hisba has reportedly impeded women's movement inside and between cities and has reduced female university attendance, though

the full effects of Hisba's activities are largely confined to areas where members are able to actively enforce religious restrictions under the aegis of a militarily uncontested HTS.

***HTS's governance and justice provision – 'Boys' club'*** HTS's dominant position in Idlib province has stifled Local Councils' (LCs) progress in integrating women into local governance. Additionally, HTS-linked courts generally enforce gender-related rulings on women, including by shuttering women's non-governmental organizations (NGO) and otherwise restricting women's freedom and participation in public life.

***HTS's limited southern presence – 'Not a Little Idlib'*** In contrast to HTS's dominance in Idlib, the group's presence in Dar'a is largely confined to a handful of military bases outside major population centers. As such, HTS lacks any considerable influence over social life or governance in the south. In Dar'a, HTS's indoctrination activities are limited to religious study circles at HTS headquarters and certain mosques. These activities almost exclusively aim to recruit able-bodied young men, with some religious courses also offered to children. In areas of lesser influence, HTS's activities are limited to distribution of print media promoting HTS's religious views at mosques or checkpoints. In this context, the only reported instance of indoctrination of women is led by the wives of HTS commanders in al-Musayfira, who host Quranic memorization classes in private homes.



## Introduction

### Research Context

The research and analysis contained in this report is current as of May 2018. At the time of writing, the military situation in Syria is subject to change rapidly, with a high probability of an imminent regime offensive on rebel-held Dar'a. With changes in military realities, the social activities discussed in this report are also subject to change. However, even as details on the ground change, the broader themes discussed throughout the report remain relevant to understanding and predicting HTS's approach to social control.

### Research Question

This report explores how *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) appeals to and influences women, as well as women's role within the group in Syria's Idlib and Dar'a provinces. The principal aims of this analysis are: a) to better understand how women participate in and are affected by HTS and b) to offer programmatic recommendations to address the push and pull factors that shape women's engagement with HTS and which create opportunities for HTS to recruit, influence, or otherwise affect women and girls.

Existing research on HTS has focused primarily on the group's military and governance functions and specifically, the involvement of military-aged males in such roles. This has left a significant gap in understanding how the group's various social activities are used

to attract and influence different groups and sub-groups of women. Such information is valuable for ensuring that future programming addresses multiple gender groups, in particular women, in a way that is targeted and responsive to their needs.

### *Analytical Approach*

In designing research frameworks and instruments for this report, TSN relied on a gender-differentiated approach to researching and analyzing HTS's activities and their impacts. Although women are the primary focus of this analysis, TSN designed research tools to generate a comprehensive contextual understanding of the socially and politically constructed roles and behaviors attributed to both men and women, as well as the systems of power which they create. In investigating the status of women, TSN research instruments retained intersectionality in all areas to capture how factors including age, marital status, and class shape gender identities.

This gender-differentiated analysis of HTS's social activities serves to identify norms and behaviors unique to different ages and classes of women. Focusing analysis on areas of HTS's social programs in which women play prominent roles—such as indoctrination—while also looking at any secondary role they play elsewhere in the group, enables the identification and assessment of the push and pull factors and entry points that structure women's engagement with the group. The identification of such factors is necessary to inform follow-on programming initiatives and interventions. Given shifts in conflict dynamics and their potential to shape gender norms and behaviors, TSN formatted this analysis to be updated regularly to capture the effects of both short- and long-term developments.

### *Methodology*

This research employed a number of qualitative instruments to investigate how HTS approaches women in opposition-held northern and southern Syria. Prior to deploying field research tools, TSN's analysts conducted a thorough desk review of existing literature on armed groups and gender, HTS's social activities in northern and southern Syria, and what is known about the group's approach to gender. Qualitative instruments were then designed to build on existing information and to account for knowledge gaps in terms of variation in HTS's approach to women in relation to other gender groupings.

Research tools consisted of 30 in-depth interviews, 12 focus group discussions (FGDs), 14 city reports, and 12 bespoke reports. Field research was conducted between February and April 2018.

**City Reports:** City reports were prepared across 14 locations (seven in Idlib Province and seven in Dar'a Province). TSN conceived of and designed these reports to better understand women's role and status in society as well as the dynamics and power of HTS's social influence in each location. The content of these reports lent TSN analysts an understanding of gender dynamics and HTS's role in shaping them in both regions. The reports were then used to identify gaps and trends to be explored in-depth through other qualitative tools.

**In-depth Interviews:** Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted with community leaders and other "informed" individuals including teachers, former Islamist fighters, and women

who have worked with HTS. Interview questions were designed to elicit long-form, in-depth responses from interviewees on women's role in supporting armed groups as well as conditions these groups could exploit to target women and children. Interviewees were selected in collaboration with the research partners based on criteria and profiles provided by TSN's analytical team and privileged those with direct experience or contact with HTS's social programs or individuals with access to other relevant information.

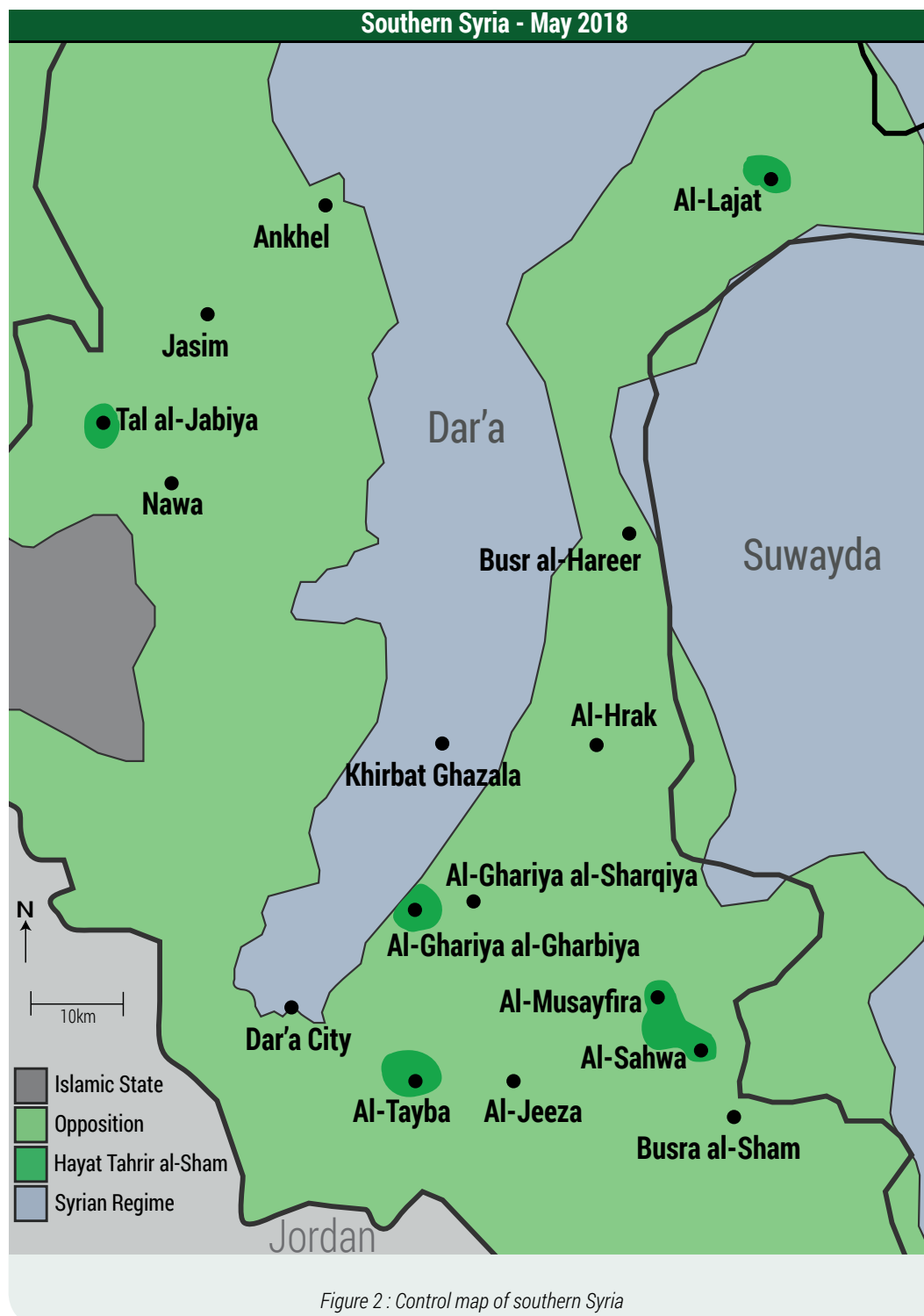
**Bespoke Reports:** Twelve bespoke reports were commissioned and were designed to provide in-depth information on pre-identified trends, activities, or topics. TSN's analytical team commissioned bespoke reports after the city reports were received to follow-up on knowledge gaps and delve deeper into specific themes related to the overall objective of the research project. Each report was based on organizational knowledge, interviews, and investigative reporting conducted by the research supplier.

**Focus Groups:** Twelve focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with men and women across Idlib and Dar'a provinces. FGDs were intended to test narratives and gather reactions to hypothetical scenarios, providing anecdotal support to overall research into HTS activities. TSN provided discussion guides for trained moderators that covered explored local perceptions of topics including: women's status in society, women's role in armed groups, and women's perceptions of service provision and gender-focused NGO programming.

**Research Challenges:** TSN's research partners encountered several challenges while conducting field research which led to difficulty in gathering the information requested by field research tools. These challenges—all stemming from the research's focus on HTS—were particularly pronounced in Dar'a. Although HTS has a limited presence in Dar'a in comparison to Idlib, interviewees in the south were significantly more hesitant to discuss any matters related to the group.

Chief among these were ramifications of the research collection period's coincidence with the final regime offensive on Eastern Ghouta, a campaign that was widely believed to have used HTS's presence in the area as cover for operations to clear out the last rebel-held pocket of the capital. At the time, the prevailing mood in Dar'a held that after Eastern Ghouta, the regime was likely to turn to rebel-held areas in the south. Researchers therefore reported a strong reluctance in Dar'a to discuss any matters related to HTS out of fear it would expose the community to future conflict. As a result, some interview participants were terse or refused outright to answer questions regarding HTS.

TSN's researchers and research partners were ultimately able to work within these limitations to gather accurate, cross-validated information on HTS's social activities. However, because of reluctance to discuss these activities in depth and the overall smaller scale of such activities in the south, the research in Dar'a did not benefit from the same richness of perspectives as did the research in Idlib.



## Context

### *Status of Women in Idlib and Dar'a*

In Syria, gender roles and norms are rooted in a strong patriarchal society in which men are seen as dominant figures in household decision-making, and women are often restricted from participation in public life and the workforce, with the exception of those sectors deemed “appropriate for women,” such as healthcare and education.<sup>1</sup> The 2012 outbreak of conflict created new responsibilities, challenges, and in some cases opportunities for Syrian women. Nevertheless, prevailing patriarchal gender norms, which define socially

<sup>1</sup> “Gender Dynamics in Southern Syria,” Care, October 2016

acceptable contributions for women and men to participate in Syria's civil war, prohibited women's participation in armed groups and restricted their role in local governance.

In comparison to Dar'a, gender norms in Idlib province are generally more liberal, with some women even taking on leadership roles in local governance early in the revolution. Focus group discussion participants and interviewees reported that progress in integrating women into political and economic life backslid after Islamist-dominated opposition groups rose to prominence. Several interviewees noted, however, that women remained influential in private life, explaining that women have used their status as key social nodes to facilitate recruitment for armed groups.<sup>2</sup>

The Syrian revolution created comparatively fewer opportunities in the workforce or local governance for women in Dar'a. In general, the south remains deeply conservative, with tribal patriarchy largely defining women's roles. Focus group participants and interviewees emphasized the continued dominance of conservative tribal and religious values in blocking women from workforce participation or leadership positions,<sup>3</sup> while societal conservatism in the south demands that women dress modestly and limit activity outside of the home to needs-only travel. As a result, gains for women achieved since the revolution only occurred in areas where tribal customs and traditions were comparatively weak, such as al-Jeeza. In comparison to Idlib, male and female interviewees and focus group participants were also less likely to see women as influential in private life, with one male focus group participant dismissing women as "merely housewives."<sup>4</sup>

### *HTS in the North and South*

HTS is the largest Jihadi opposition group currently active in Syria and is the primary military and governance actor in the country's northwestern Idlib province. Although the majority of HTS's operations are based in Idlib and pockets of the surrounding western Aleppo and northern Hama provinces, the group maintains a small yet significant presence in opposition-held areas of southern Dar'a province.

Since 2012, HTS, then known as the al-Nusra Front (ANF), has undergone multiple transformations and two re-brandings in an effort to present itself as a credible opposition actor. HTS was the official Al-Qa'ida (AQ) affiliate in Syria until 2016, when in the face of increased US-led coalition airstrikes on fellow former AQ affiliate the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Daesh), HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani began the process of severing ties with AQ. Jawlani subsequently rebranded the group twice—first to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in July 2016—and then in January 2017 to the group's current name, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Each of these rebranding efforts were part of a strategy aimed at presenting HTS as a credible, slightly more moderate actor

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<sup>2</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, Idlib FGD – April 2018

<sup>3</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, Idlib FGD – April 2018

<sup>4</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, Nawa FGD – April 2018; "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, al-Lajat FGD – April 2018; "Security, Governance and Justice in Syria's South," ARK Group DMCC – February 2018

while uniting Syria's fractious opposition under its aegis. This shift towards 'pragmatism' provoked public criticism from AQ central, with many AQ loyalists renouncing the group.<sup>5</sup>

In its attempt to transform itself into a robust governance actor, HTS has only succeeded in establishing governance and service bodies in Idlib province, where it maintains a strong and active military presence. At the core of these efforts is the civilian-led Salvation Government (SG), which HTS formed with civilian HTS loyalists in November 2017. HTS has sought to use the SG to exert influence over local councils (LCs), educational bodies and schools, and service provision arms. In practice, however, local administrative structures have continued to operate more-or-less independently due to strong popular opposition to HTS in militarily-contested areas.

In Dar'a province, HTS's limited military presence and failure to win over tribal leaders largely confined its influence to areas surrounding its military strongholds or those areas where it has recruited substantial numbers of local fighters.<sup>6</sup> As a result, HTS has prioritized disrupting the internationally-sponsored de-escalation zone (DeZ) over conducting significant social activities, possibly in hopes it would gain power and influence in the aftermath of a future battle for the province. Southern opposition groups remain suspicious of HTS, however, and HTS's attempts to disrupt the work of civilian governance have repeatedly provoked civilian-led protests.

### *HTS's Approach to Women*

Female involvement in Jihadi groups, particularly in military roles, is generally significantly lower than in other types of insurgencies.<sup>7</sup> The Salafi religious principles that underpin Jihadi groups prescribe gendered roles for women that restrict them to private spaces, principally as the mothers and wives of *mujahideen* (fighters). The traditional contribution of women to Jihadi groups is thus in supporting the realization of an idealized Islamic state through their contributions in the domestic sphere. However, in reality, the practical requirements of building autonomous societies have led Jihadi groups, including HTS, to diverge in their interpretation and application of Salafi theological principles on the role of women.

HTS's approach to the role women play in society and in the group occupies a middle ground between that of other Jihadi groups like Daesh and al-Qa'ida, which have respectively encouraged in limited circumstances or strictly forbidden women's serving in public roles.

<sup>5</sup> The rift between HTS and its former parent group deepened in November 2017 when HTS arrested Sami al-Uraydi and Abu Julaybib, two senior AQ-linked figures and former HTS members, eliciting a fiery and critical response from Zawahiri, further distancing HTS from AQ. Zawahiri's criticism of HTS left senior AQ figures within HTS, some of whom were sent to Syria by AQ leadership, in an uncomfortable position. The February 2018 emergence of a new Jihadist group in Syria named Hurras al-Din may indicate that senior AQ leaders are seeking to revive the group's presence in Syria. However, while Hurras al-Din quickly gained support among AQ supporters (with some speculating that the group is being led by top AQ figures), little is known about the group's leadership and membership, with its last Telegram post on April 30, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> HTS is known to operate in six locations in Dar'a province: Tal al-Jabiya, al-Liwa 138 (near Sayda), Dar'a City, al-Lajat, Jabata al-Khasab and Katibat al-Kubra.

<sup>7</sup> In comparison, women have been active members of other types of violent insurgent groups, even occupying leadership roles in ideologically Marxist or nationalist groups. For example, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an insurgent group dedicated to the formation of an independent state for the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka, pioneered the use of women in suicide attacks. In the Irish Republican Army (IRA), a nationalist paramilitary group dedicated to Irish republicanism, women also actively served in military roles.

While HTS continues to see the primary role of women as rallying support within family networks, it has also allowed limited female participation in the public sphere. Such an approach underscores the importance of women to HTS's vision of building a righteous Islamic society as well as its struggle to manage the competing demands of its dogmatic ideology and the everyday requirements of governance.

Women in Idlib province, the hub of HTS's influence, may therefore work in HTS-controlled institutions, participate in HTS social activities, or interact with HTS members as part of their daily lives. While women affiliated with HTS in Idlib are most often HTS members, this is not always the case. Women not formally affiliated with HTS continue to hold roles in public sector administrations controlled by HTS, where the demands of governance necessitate a cadre of female employees.<sup>8</sup> By comparison, because HTS conducts minimal social activities in Dar'a province, few women are believed to be active members of the group.

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<sup>8</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "Women in non-education roles" Bespoke Report, 2 – 11 April 2018

## Women, Gender, and HTS in Idlib Province

### *Female HTS Members in Non-Religious Roles*

In line with Salafi dogma which prohibits any role for women in public life, HTS has sought to restrict women's participation in governance in Idlib. Nevertheless, practical requirements associated with HTS's efforts to administer territory, provide judicial services, and enforce laws have necessitated that the group compromise on some of its ideological tenets and include women on a limited scale in such sectors.

**Security/law enforcement:** With its takeover of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, the main gateway to northern Syria, HTS inherited responsibility for border control and security. Thousands of people are granted permission to move between opposition-held areas in northern Syria and Turkey, necessitating the search of travelers and maintenance of security. Female employees of the Bab al-Hawa and Khirbet al-Jawz border crossings, therefore, deal with matters related to women such as searching and arresting women suspected of smuggling and other illicit activities.<sup>9</sup> In this specific case, female employees are not ideologically affiliated with HTS, but rather are paid employees that had previously served in these roles under Ahrar al-Sham's (AAS) administration of the border.<sup>10</sup>

**Courts/Prisons:** Many HTS-controlled justice institutions and courts have offices staffed by female HTS members who deal with women's issues.<sup>11</sup> Female members of the group oversee temporary detainment cells as wardens.<sup>12</sup> HTS's Dar al-Qada court in Salqin, for example, reportedly includes a team of five female HTS members who oversee female inmates, assuming responsibilities including conducting preliminary interrogations and searches.<sup>13</sup> In HTS-linked courts, women in some instances assist judges in collecting evidence in cases related to honor crimes and adultery, recording women's testimonies.<sup>14</sup> In such cases, these women are often the wives or immediate relatives of HTS fighters and are ideologically affiliated with and directly trained by HTS.<sup>15</sup>

**Intelligence:** Women have also been rumored to gather intelligence for HTS. According to interviews, it is commonly believed that HTS employs female informants to collect information on other women active in their community and to gather general intelligence

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***Practical requirements associated with HTS's efforts to administer territory have necessitated that the group compromise on some of its ideological tenets and include women on a limited scale.***

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<sup>9</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "Women in non-education roles" Bespoke Report, 1 – 11 April 2018

<sup>10</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "Women in non-education roles" Bespoke Report, 1 – 11 April 2018

<sup>11</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "Women in non-education roles" Bespoke Report, 1 – 11 April 2018

<sup>12</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "Women in non-education roles" Bespoke Report, 2 – 11 April 2018

<sup>13</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "Women in non-education roles" Bespoke Report, 2 – 11 April 2018

<sup>14</sup> For example, at al-Dana's court, according to an interview, a female court employee collected testimony from a woman for a divorce case involving marital issues; "CORINTH" Network, "Women in non-education roles" Bespoke Report, 2 – 11 April 2018

<sup>15</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "Women in non-education roles" Bespoke Report, 4 – 11 April 2018

for the group.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, HTS is believed to employ female informants in regime-held areas to gather military intelligence, as they are seen as less conspicuous than men.<sup>17</sup>

### *Female HTS Members in Religious Outreach*

The main agents of HTS's outreach to women are networks of ideologically-committed female preachers who work almost entirely in *da'wa* (Islamic proselytization) related roles. These female preachers in most cases have marital or familial ties to HTS and many are believed to be *muhajirat*, or the foreign wives of HTS fighters, although Syrian women may now outnumber *muhajirat* in religious education roles.<sup>18</sup> Notably, female preachers of Syrian descent often hail from IDP communities and may also have familial ties to HTS.<sup>19</sup>

Female HTS members mainly recruit other women from within their own social circles. These women are believed to be more open to participation due to their preexisting ties to HTS (including through marriage) and, in the case of IDPs, HTS's control of their communities. HTS generally eschews recruitment outside of these social circles due to the risk of provoking societal backlash that would jeopardize HTS's popularity and military strength.<sup>20</sup> Many female participants in HTS's religious activities then proceed to serve in religious education or policing roles in HTS or HTS-affiliated institutions (see below), thereby broadening the network through which HTS is able to conduct outreach to women.<sup>21</sup>

### *HTS's Religious Education and Intervention in Education in Idlib*

Prior to the onset of conflict, Idlib had experienced a renaissance of religiosity, such that it was sometimes referred to as "little Azhar" after the famous center of Islamic learning in Egypt.<sup>22</sup> However, the traditional Syrian clergy largely came from the more moderate *Sufi* and *Ash'ari* Islamic currents, and religious education was either provided through state-run bodies or through independent religious circles in mosques.<sup>23</sup> The subsequent "Islamization" of Syria's civil war fueled the rise of Salafism<sup>24</sup> in northern Syria at the expense of these

<sup>16</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "Women in non-education roles" Bespoke Report, 5 – 11 April 2018

<sup>17</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "Women in non-education roles" Bespoke Report, 5 – 11 April 2018

<sup>18</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Female Preachers" Bespoke Report, 3 – 24 March 2018

<sup>19</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Female Preachers" Bespoke Report, 3 – 24 March 2018

<sup>20</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network Idlib City Report, 11 – 1 March 2018; "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Sawa'id al-Khayr" Bespoke Report, 2 – 14 March 2018

<sup>21</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Female Preachers" Bespoke Report, 2-3 – 24 March 2018

<sup>22</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Female Preachers" Bespoke Report, 1 – 24 March 2018

<sup>23</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Education in northern Syria" Bespoke Report, 2 – 21 March 2018

<sup>24</sup> Salafism is an Islamist movement that emphasizes the *Salaf* (the earliest community of believers) as the strict model for contemporary Islamic practice. While it began as a movement for modernist reform in the 1880s, it eventually evolved and took its contemporary form in the 1980s, focusing on the reform of the Islamic polity and reestablishing its moral underpinnings.

more moderate religious currents<sup>25</sup> as wealthy foreign backers supported the expansion of rising Salafi factions, including HTS, through an expansion of religious institutes.<sup>26</sup>

HTS's approach to indoctrination comprises two lines of effort: intervention in the formal school system and an expansion of religious education into local communities.<sup>27</sup> HTS's influence over public education is currently limited to ad-hoc interventions in schools that seek to force students and teachers to conform to Salafi religious norms. Through the SG, HTS attempted to take control of schools in the north through co-opting the Syrian Interim Government (SIG)-linked education department and universities in Idlib. However, popular protests and the threat of cuts to international donor support have thus far stymied HTS.<sup>28</sup>

With avenues to influence public education mostly closed to HTS, the group has focused its efforts on providing religious education. For HTS, religious education is an inexpensive and efficient means to promote its ideology.<sup>29</sup> Indoctrination also helps to expand networks of support through which it can exercise social influence and control, including through mediating interpersonal disputes, delivering aid and services, and providing counsel to community leaders.<sup>30</sup> As such, religious education is invaluable in that it allows HTS to expand local influence without provoking the public backlash that its attempted interventions in governance and justice have incurred. Furthermore, the social influence built through religious education helps to provide HTS with steady stream of recruits to its military apparatus.<sup>31</sup>

#### *Curriculum in HTS's Religious Education in Idlib*

HTS-run religious education initiatives comprise three levels of instruction. For the general population—regardless of age and gender—HTS's efforts focus on Quranic memorization and recitation as well as some instruction on "proper conduct".<sup>32</sup> HTS injects its Salafi-Jihadi world-view into such classes, normalizing its extremist discourse among the population, which is particularly invidious when it comes to children's education. HTS's curriculum is intended to gradually reorient students towards accepting hyper-conservative governance, legal, and social modes as well as accompanying conservative gender roles. In more advanced instruction for youth and adults, HTS instruction focuses on canon works of Salafism and jurisprudence.<sup>33</sup> This more advanced instruction on Salafi principles has produced cadres of clerics and missionaries tasked with spreading HTS's religious values

<sup>25</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Education in northern Syria" Bespoke Report, 2 –21 March 2018

<sup>26</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Education in northern Syria" Bespoke Report, 2 –21 March 2018

<sup>27</sup> Educational institutions in opposition-held northwestern Syria are divided between the SIG and the regime.

<sup>28</sup> As reported in TSN's HTS Analytical Fortnightly (23 January 2018), HTS's closure of Aleppo University branches in Idlib provoked non-violent demonstrations by students and teachers; "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Education in northern Syria" Bespoke Report, 2 –21 March 2018.

<sup>29</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Education in northern Syria" Bespoke Report, 2-3 –21 March 2018

<sup>30</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Education in northern Syria" Bespoke Report, 4 –21 March 2018

<sup>31</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Education in northern Syria" Bespoke Report, 4 –21 March 2018

<sup>32</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS curriculum" Bespoke Report, 4 – 24 March 2018

<sup>33</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS curriculum" Bespoke Report, 4 – 24 March 2018; "Education in northern Syria" Bespoke Report, 5 –21 March 2018

within their own communities. Meanwhile, already-committed HTS members are trained internally on Salafism's ideological variant, Salafi-Jihadism.<sup>34</sup>

### *Coordinating Bodies in HTS's Religious Education*

HTS's indoctrination efforts rely on various lines of effort spread across HTS-held areas of Idlib province. The links between HTS and sub-branches conducting indoctrination are largely opaque and range from direct control to management by proxy. As HTS has shifted towards greater pragmatism, it has begun centralizing indoctrination activities by incorporating them under nominally unaffiliated institutions.

Many of HTS's religious education and indoctrination activities are overseen by the group's Shari'a Office, a religious leadership body within the group. HTS's clerics in the Shari'a Office have influence over the Religious Endowments Department, which was established by HTS as part of its nascent bureaucracy in July 2017 and is now incorporated under the SG.<sup>35</sup> In June 2017, HTS also established Sawa'id al-Khayr (Benevolent Hands Association) as a coordinating body for religious education and *da'wa* campaigns.<sup>36</sup> While HTS has avoided public association with Sawa'id al-Khayr, the group is commonly seen as an extension of HTS.

At present, Sawa'id al-Khayr is staffed by some 50 HTS members, 15 of whom are women. The association encompasses an apparatus that conducts religious policing (more below), a *da'wa* office for religious outreach, and a religious institute for education.<sup>37</sup> Sawa'id al-Khayr operates mainly in Idlib City and Salqin, and to a lesser extent in Jisr al-Shughur and Darkush, where large IDP populations and a dearth of competition from rival groups minimize the risk of backlash. Although it is less active in smaller towns and rural villages where stronger tribal and communal authorities generally oppose social activities by external actors, interviewees



Figure 3 : Sawa'id al-Khayr logo

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***At present, Sawa'id al-Khayr is staffed by some 50 HTS members, 15 of whom are women.***

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<sup>34</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS curriculum" Bespoke Report, 4 – 24 March 2018; "Education in northern Syria" Bespoke Report, 5 – 21 March 2018

<sup>35</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS and Mosques" Bespoke Report, 2 – 3 April 2018

<sup>36</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, Idlib City Report, 11 – 1 March 2018

<sup>37</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Sawa'id al-Khayr" Bespoke Report, 3 – 14 March 2018

and research partners reported that HTS intends to expand Sawa'id al-Khayr's activities in the coming months to other areas of Idlib.<sup>38</sup>

### *Sub-bodies and Activities in HTS's Religious Education in Idlib*

Under the umbrella of the Religious Endowments Department and Sawa'id al-Khayr, HTS supports a range of religious education opportunities through control or influence over shari'a institutes, *da'wa* offices, and mosques.

**HTS-linked Shari'a Institutes:** HTS has established a number of small and medium-sized shari'a institutes<sup>39</sup> to provide Quranic memorization and Arabic language classes to children as well as advanced instruction in Islamic sciences (theology and jurisprudence) to youth and adults.<sup>40</sup> These directly-controlled institutes are prevalent in areas under where HTS predominates.<sup>41</sup> For example, HTS established the Qunaytra Institute—a small school in the southern Idlib town of Hafsarja—to provide simple religious instruction and Quranic memorization classes to children.<sup>42</sup> Elsewhere, in the northern Idlib town of Sarmada, HTS's al-Huda Institute provides the same type of religious education at a larger scale and is able to reach some 150-175 students, 15-25 of which are girls under the age of 14.<sup>43</sup>

**HTS-aligned Shari'a Institutes:** In addition to the institutes it directly runs, HTS supports several small and medium sized shari'a institutes with funding. These generally serve to facilitate HTS's indoctrination aims in areas where it does not exercise full control or substantial influence. Notably, interviews suggest that residents do not readily distinguish between HTS-controlled and HTS-aligned shari'a institutes.<sup>44</sup> HTS-aligned institutes appear to operate with some autonomy but are licensed by the Religious Endowments Department and are often established by graduates of HTS's religious institutes, which ensures curricular conformity.<sup>45,46</sup>

One example of such an institute widely believed to be associated with HTS is the Du'at al-Jihad (Jihad's Callers) center, established in 2014 by the Saudi-born cleric Abdullah al-Muhaysini.<sup>47</sup> Du'at al-Jihad is designed to train clerics to serve in Islamist factions (including

<sup>38</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Sawa'id al-Khayr" Bespoke Report, 2 – 14 March 2018

<sup>39</sup> Shari'a institutes are generally housed in confiscated or abandoned school and government buildings, where religious classes are offered to different age-groups and target audiences on a weekly basis. These institutes are headed by male HTS clerics and affiliated women who have pre-existing social or familial ties with the group.

<sup>40</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Education in northern Syria" Bespoke Report, 3 –21 March 2018

<sup>41</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Education in northern Syria" Bespoke Report, 3 –21 March 2018

<sup>42</sup> According to TSN's networks, the institute was recently destroyed by an airstrike and did not resume operations "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Education in northern Syria" Bespoke Report, 3 –21 March 2018

<sup>43</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Education in northern Syria" Bespoke Report, 3 –21 March 2018

<sup>44</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Education in northern Syria" Bespoke Report, 3 –21 March 2018

<sup>45</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Education in northern Syria" Bespoke Report, 3 –21 March 2018

<sup>46</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Education in northern Syria" Bespoke Report, 3 –21 March 2018

<sup>47</sup> Abdullah al-Muhaysini is a charismatic Saudi-born cleric who traveled to Syria in 2013, where he rose to prominence as an independent Islamist jurist. Following the opposition takeover of Idlib in 2015, Muhaysini served as an Islamic judge with Jaysh al-Fatah, a coalition of Islamist rebel groups that oversaw the administration of Idlib City. Early in 2017, he joined HTS as a shar'i but later left following controversy over the group's infractions against the opposition. Nonetheless, he maintains cordial relationships with the group, and has sought in numerous instances to resolve opposition disputes with HTS.

HTS) as chaplains.<sup>48</sup> Whereas HTS has restricted the activity of many religious institutes in the province owing to their divergence from HTS's ideology, Du'at al-Jihad is allowed to operate across territory controlled by HTS, including Idlib City, al-Dana, and Ariha. The institute offers advanced courses in Islamic jurisprudence and theology and conducts *da'wa* campaigns among the residents of Idlib Province.<sup>49</sup> These ad-hoc campaigns involve sending preachers to public markets and squares as well as distributing brochures and leaflets on topics such appropriate dress, shari'a-compliant business practices, and tobacco use. The center has also hosted public gatherings and competitions to incentivize participation.<sup>50</sup> In addition to its indoctrination and proselytization activities, the center has conducted several successful military recruitment drives for HTS, the most popular of which was the *Unfur* (Enlist!) Campaign which recruited some 1,500 fighters for HTS in 2016.<sup>51</sup>



Figure 4 : Jihad's Callers Center campaign promoting female preachers (Source - Telegram)

**HTS-Controlled Mosques:** As traditional centers of religious and social activity, mosques are key avenues for religious education for men. Whereas congregational prayer at mosques is encouraged or even mandatory in some instances for men, women's attendance is optional, and is in some cases discouraged by Salafis, resulting in an estimated two percent female attendance rate.<sup>52,53</sup>

The hosting of religious circles at mosques, wherein a known cleric teaches Islamic jurisprudence and theology following prayers, was common in northern Syria prior to the revolution.<sup>54</sup> Along with other Islamist armed groups, HTS sought to build on this widespread practice to disseminate its views and norms among the local population, especially in areas beyond its reach.<sup>55</sup> For example, in smaller communities where HTS has not established shari'a institutes, it has relied on such gatherings for indoctrination and proselytization. In Saraqeb and Kafranbel, two cities that have repeatedly resisted HTS's interference, the group has exclusively used mosques for such tasks. HTS's ability to establish influence

<sup>48</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Jihad's Callers" Bespoke Report, 1 – 14 March 2018

<sup>49</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Jihad's Callers" Bespoke Report, 1 – 14 March 2018

<sup>50</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Jihad's Callers" Bespoke Report, 2 – 14 March 2018

<sup>51</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Jihad's Callers" Bespoke Report, 2 – 14 March 2018

<sup>52</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS and Mosques" Bespoke Report, 2 – 3 April 2018; Salafi doctrine goes as far as to discourage women's prayer at mosques, but Salafi groups do not always prevent them from doing so.

<sup>53</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS and Mosques" Bespoke Report, 2 – 3 April 2018

<sup>54</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Jihad's Callers" Bespoke Report, 2 – 14 March 2018

<sup>55</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Jihad's Callers" Bespoke Report, 2 – 14 March 2018

over mosques also relies on its control of the Religious Endowments Department, which it uses to appoint loyal imams at mosques across the province.

***Da'wa Offices and Campaigns:*** HTS operates a number of *da'wa* offices located in major population centers. *Da'wa* offices provide an outlet for people to seek religious advice on matters of everyday concern and conduct regular proselytization campaigns and activities. One such campaign was January 2018's "Prayer is my salvation", which included a children's festival, Quranic memorization competition, and the distribution of brochures in marketplaces and public squares.<sup>56</sup>

### ***HTS's Religious Education and Women***

Likely because encouraging female engagement was not initially a key line of effort for HTS, religious education for women appears to be mostly ad-hoc and largely led by HTS followers who may or may not be affiliated with HTS's indoctrination bodies or affiliates.

However, religious instruction for women includes common themes rooted in Salafi religious ideology, such as the importance of gender self-segregation and the necessity intermarriage among HTS supporters.<sup>57</sup>

Like religious education for men, women's religious education generally follows a curriculum managed by the Religious Endowments Department. Women are taught abridged "women's versions" of certain texts, with a focus mainly on the role of women and men in society, such as the importance of gender segregation, proper religious dress, and women's role in the home.<sup>58</sup> Religious education for women also serves as a tool to encourage women to engage in behavior supportive of the group's goals. For example, following repeated rifts between local Syrian women and the foreign wives of HTS fighters, one female preacher used a religious circle in Atma to explain to local women the importance of supporting foreign fighters and pro-actively conducting *da'wa* among their wives.<sup>59</sup>

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Owing to Salafi opposition to any role for women in public life, religious education targeting women tends to occur in private spaces such as the home or women-only religious institutes,<sup>60</sup> *da'wa* offices, or shari'a institutes. More formal religious education opportunities, such as those offered by shari'a institutes, tend only to be offered in areas in which HTS exercises complete control, such as Salqin and Idlib City. Meanwhile, religious education

<sup>56</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Sawa'id al-Khayr" Bespoke Report, 5 – 14 March 2018

<sup>57</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS curriculum" Bespoke Report, 2, 4 – 24 March 2018

<sup>58</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS curriculum" Bespoke Report, 2 – 24 March 2018

<sup>59</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS curriculum" Bespoke Report, 2 – 24 March 2018

<sup>60</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS curriculum" Bespoke Report, 3 – 24 March 2018

for women in areas where HTS competes for influence with other armed factions tends to be limited mostly to religious circles.

### *Evolution of Women's Religious Education*

In part because religious education for women was not initially a priority effort for HTS, the provision of women's education has largely remained a bottom-up effort, in contrast to top-down indoctrination efforts targeting male HTS members. Religious education for women began in the form of religious circles led by—and took place in the homes of—the wives of HTS fighters, before expanding to formal mechanisms such as shari'a institutes. For example, the women who currently oversee the women's religious institute in Binnish initially oversaw private gatherings in homes and (rarely) mosques.<sup>61</sup> The transition of women's education into a more formal, centrally-organized effort has occurred in part because HTS has come to place a greater emphasis on women's indoctrination in funding the expansion of religious education for women under Sawa'id al-Khayr. Nevertheless, women's indoctrination via religious education continues to occur mainly through social networks of female HTS supporters.

**Religious circles:** Participation in religious circles was initially voluntary and mainly constituted a social outlet for *muhajirat*.<sup>62</sup> With time, religious circles expanded as women invited friends and relatives to participate, creating overlapping networks of women indoctrinated into HTS's ideology whom the group would subsequently recruit into more formal educational institutes, such as Sawa'id al-Khayr.<sup>63</sup> With the growth of some religious circles and an increased emphasis on outreach to women, some religious circles were later formalized into shari'a institutes or *da'wa* offices.

**Shari'a institutes/da'wa offices:** Like religious circles, religious education activities at women-focused education centers are run by female members of HTS, most of whom are the wives or relatives of HTS fighters. Female preachers within HTS, particularly wives of HTS fighters, also travel to different institutes on an ad-hoc basis to speak at special events.<sup>64</sup> Videos published by women's shari'a institutes suggest that events are restricted to institute members, with those outside this social sphere not invited to participate.<sup>65</sup> Most of these women-focused shari'a institutes and *da'wa* offices receive some type of support from HTS, whether that be funding, print materials, or food assistance to distribute

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***With time, religious circles expanded as women invited friends and relatives to participate, creating overlapping networks of women indoctrinated into HTS's ideology.***

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<sup>61</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "HTS's female preachers" Bespoke Report – 20 March 2018

<sup>62</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "HTS's female preachers" Bespoke Report, 2 – 20 March 2018

<sup>63</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS's outreach to women" Bespoke Report, 1 – 6 April 2018

<sup>64</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "HTS's female preachers" Bespoke Report, 3 – 20 March 2018

<sup>65</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Education in northern Syria" Bespoke Report, 6 – 21 March 2018

to members.<sup>66</sup> Some shari'a institutes also offer secular education for children in subjects such as math and science.<sup>67</sup>

### *Targeted Demographics and Motivations for Participation*

Because of cultural and religious restrictions on public roles for women, recruitment of women into religious education generally relies on smaller, interpersonal networks. Participation in religious education classes and circles therefore usually follows a personal invitation from a woman who has already received some form of religious education from HTS. In part due to the reliance on these smaller interpersonal networks for recruitment, female relatives of HTS fighters remain the group's target demographic.

After women participate in some form of HTS-linked religious education, female preachers follow up by encouraging participants to recruit other women from within their personal networks. Moreover, after religious circles disband, women often form private WhatsApp groups to keep in touch. Voice recordings of sermons delivered at the religious circle may be shared in the group, which women are encouraged to share with friends or relatives, either by inviting them to join the group, posting the sermon on social media, or propagating it through private messaging.<sup>68</sup>

Recruitment of women outside immediate HTS social networks is generally limited to those in IDP communities, in which HTS often wields almost uncontested influence. IDP women, who generally cannot afford internet service or smartphones, are recruited mainly through in-person interactions. For example, female HTS members may hold a religious circle in an IDP camp and invite displaced women they meet while distributing religious pamphlets or humanitarian aid to attend.

There are a range of reasons why IDPs and women within HTS social circles may choose to engage in religious education opportunities provided by HTS. For IDPs and the wives or relatives of HTS fighters—both demographics which are often ostracized—religious education offers a sense of community and rare forum for approbation. Furthermore, according to FGD participants and interviewees, some of these women may also be motivated by a degree of sympathy with HTS's ideology.<sup>69</sup> For some women, particularly IDPs, financial considerations may also be a main driver, with attendance at a single religious lecture potentially resulting in benefits such as food aid. Moreover, given that female participants



Figure 5 : Saw'a'id al-Khayr promotional campaign (Source - Telegram)

<sup>66</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "HTS's female preachers" Bespoke Report, 2 – 20 March 2018

<sup>67</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "HTS's female preachers" Bespoke Report, 1 – 20 March 2018

<sup>68</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "HTS's female preachers" Bespoke Report, 3 – 20 March 2018; "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS's outreach to women" Bespoke Report, 2 – 6 April 2018

<sup>69</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, North FGDs and interviews - April 2018

in HTS activities may then be offered paid positions in HTS or HTS-affiliated institutions, engaging in religious education offers a potential pathway to employment for women who have become the main breadwinners in their family.<sup>70</sup> For other women, particularly widowed IDPs, religious education may also be accompanied by the opportunity to marry an HTS fighter and the associated promise of relief from financial pressures.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, offers of childhood education at certain shari'a institutes in areas where education has been disrupted, such as IDP camps, may be another important incentive.



Figure 6 : Sawa'id al-Khayr veiling campaign (Source - Telegram)

In general, HTS has eschewed recruiting women without familial ties to HTS (or from non-IDP communities) into religious education due to the risk of provoking societal backlash that would jeopardize HTS's position in Idlib province.<sup>72</sup> However, there is some indication that educated, middle-class women may also be participating in HTS-linked religious education, albeit rarely. Participation by these women is reported to be restricted to larger shari'a institutes, which offer graduate certificates that afford a measure of prestige.<sup>73</sup> These institutes tend to be better resourced and therefore are able to use social media to reach out to women in social circles where HTS lacks influence or ties.<sup>74</sup>

With indications that HTS is increasing its focus on recruitment of women, the group is likely to support an expansion of opportunities for women-only religious education. However, whether this will include women outside of HTS's typical target audience will likely depend on the risk of societal backlash.

### *HTS's Religious Policing in Idlib Province*

In addition to religious education, HTS has adopted a more active form of proselytization, termed *Hisba*. As a concept, *Hisba*<sup>75</sup> (loosely defined as 'accountability') is the public duty of ensuring society's adherence to proper religious values. Compared to religious education efforts, which involve a conscious decision to seek out guidance, *Hisba* is a more coercive form of indoctrination. Because of the dogmatism and extreme violence

<sup>70</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Female Preachers" Bespoke Report, 2-3 – 24 March 2018

<sup>71</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "HTS's female preachers" Bespoke Report, 11 – 20 March 2018

<sup>72</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, Idlib City Report, 11 – 1 March 2018; "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Sawa'id al-Khayr" Bespoke Report, 2 – 14 March 2018

<sup>73</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS's outreach to women" Bespoke Report, 3 – 6 April 2018

<sup>74</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS's outreach to women" Bespoke Report, 3 – 6 April 2018

<sup>75</sup> *Hisba* is rooted in the Quranic expression "the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice," which emphasizes the importance proselytization for the building of a just Islamic society.

attributed to Daesh's Hisba, the term has only recently come to connote a body responsible for enforcing religious restrictions and punishing violations. While other Jihadi groups have also interpreted Hisba as underpinning the creation of a morality police, the exact mandate of different Hisba groups depends entirely on the group promoting it.

There has also been some debate within HTS itself over Hisba's mandate and proper role in society. This debate was fueled by the negative attitude towards Hisba, with some within the group fearing any association with Daesh's identically-named body would damage popular support for HTS.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, while some HTS clerics individually pushed this form of proselytization across Idlib province in the past, this did not appear to be an effort mandated by the organization's leadership. However, with HTS's rebranding and its move towards standardizing a moderated approach towards civilians, the group's leadership opted to formalize and implement a milder form of Hisba under the Sawa'id al-Khayr Association in Idlib City.<sup>77</sup>

In addition to Sawa'id al-Khayr's da'wa office and shari'a institute, its Hisba office was established to ensure that the group's conservative religious norms were followed in public settings. Though it lacks the legal mandate and enforcement capability of a police force in most geographies, the apparatus' approach remains coercive, using intimidation to force people to abide by the group's edicts. Moreover, in certain cities and towns where HTS is dominant, the group's Hisba enjoys the backing of religious courts, which issue decisions and decrees providing the office's actions with legal cover.<sup>78</sup>

The Hisba office is most active in Idlib City and a handful of cities in northern Idlib, such as Salqin and al-Dana. Its activities involve the patrolling of public spaces—such as markets, squares, schools, hospitals, and government buildings—and the enforcement certain dress codes, business practices, and gender segregation. This apparatus has also intervened in formal education, forcing schools to remove certain subjects such philosophy and the nationalism classes from their curriculum.<sup>79</sup>

More recently, in March 2018, Sawa'id al-Khayr launched the Idlib al-Khayr (Good Idlib) project, an initiative which plans to codify HTS's religious norms into a legal framework. To implement these laws, Sawa'id al-Khayr will devote substantial resources to support a more coercive implementation of Hisba. To this end, since February 2018 Hisba has been

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<sup>76</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Sawa'id al-Khayr" Bespoke Report, 1 – 14 March 2018

<sup>77</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Sawa'id al-Khayr" Bespoke Report, 1 – 14 March 2018

<sup>78</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS-linked courts" Bespoke Reports, 5 – 21 March 2018

<sup>79</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Sawa'id al-Khayr" Bespoke Report, 1 – 14 March 2018

conducting almost daily patrols in markets and has been more aggressive in its treatment of what it sees as major religious violations.<sup>80</sup>

### *Female Membership in HTS's Hisba*

Although women form part of HTS's broader indoctrination effort, their involvement in religious policing is perhaps the most visible role they occupy in the group. Sawa'id al-Khayr's Women's Office dispatches women—generally in small groups of three or four—to accompany male Hisba members on their patrols of schools, markets, and hospitals.<sup>81</sup> Because HTS did not initially have such a female contingent to carry out public policing, wives of HTS fighters initially volunteered in such a capacity on an ad-hoc basis. With the establishment of a Women's Office within Sawa'id al-Khayr, women's participation in Hisba has now become a formal component of HTS's social policing.

Recruitment of women into Hisba generally relies on HTS's social networks and pipelines from religious institutes and will typically have received some form of religious education from HTS institutions. For instance, most of the approximately 15 female members of Hisba in Idlib City are the close relatives of HTS fighters and are often from outside the local population (e.g. foreigners and IDPs).<sup>82,83</sup> According to interviews, these women receive 30-40 days of religious training before being sent on Hisba patrols.<sup>84</sup>

Compared with their counterparts in shari'a institutes and *da'wa* offices, female Hisba members appear to receive better salaries, making it a more attractive role for those who join for financial reward. Interviews have revealed that female Hisba members earn a monthly salary of 100 USD, which is fivefold more than private preachers reportedly receive.<sup>85</sup> Some female Hisba members may also be motivated by the power perceived to accompany religious policing roles, which gives them the ability to exert influence over women of similar or higher socioeconomic standing, an opportunity that does not exist on a comparable scale for female employees of religious institutes.

Female preachers generally patrol public places frequented by women, such as schools, hospitals, and markets. Whereas they conduct some non-confrontational activities as part of their *da'wa* campaigns—such as handing out pamphlets and providing verbal advice—they have also confronted women over perceived violations of HTS's dress code, gender mixing, and travel without a male custodian. At schools, for example, female Hisba members have forced girls to remove make-up and have sent them home when they have failed to abide by the HTS-mandated dress code.<sup>86</sup> Multiple interviewees have also mentioned instances

<sup>80</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Hisba" Bespoke Reports, 2 – 3 April 2018

<sup>81</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Sawa'id al-Khayr" Bespoke Report, 2 – 14 March 2018

<sup>82</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Sawa'id al-Khayr" Bespoke Report, 2 – 14 March 2018

<sup>83</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Sawa'id al-Khayr" Bespoke Report, 2 – 14 March 2018

<sup>84</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, Ma'rat al-Nu'man (Men) In-depth Interviews – April 2018

<sup>85</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, Ma'rat al-Nu'man (Women) In-depth Interviews – April 2018

<sup>86</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "HTS's female preachers" Bespoke Report, 4 – 20 March 2018

when female preachers publicly beat women for wearing *abayas* (loose, robe-like dresses) that did not sufficiently cover their feet or ankles.<sup>87</sup>

### *Societal Impacts and Perceptions of HTS's Hisba*

The coercive element of HTS's Hisba is a problematic face of HTS's social activities for women's participation in public life. Although women in Idlib tended to dress conservatively prior to the onset of conflict, many have nonetheless further covered up to avoid harassment from Hisba members.<sup>88</sup> Hisba activities have also contributed to perceptions of further barriers to women's freedom of movement outside the home, thereby affecting their participation in the workforce and public life in the province. For example, in February 2018, Hisba halted the completion of a free public transportation project by the NGO *Banafsaj* in Idlib because of gender mixing on buses, a policy which hurt low-income men and women who would have benefited from the service.<sup>89</sup> Female attendance at Idlib University is also reported to have declined due to harassment from female Hisba members, with interviewees noting that women often avoid attending university on days when they know patrols will be present.<sup>90</sup>

Major effects of Hisba activities have remained largely confined to areas in which Hisba members are able to act relatively unchecked in their enforcement of religious restrictions. In comparison, Hisba patrols in areas where HTS's control is contested tend to be markedly less confrontational. Moreover, female HTS members appear to only join Hisba patrols in areas where HTS is dominant, such as Idlib, Salqin, and al-Dana, although Hisba apparatuses exist in many major cities across Idlib.<sup>91</sup> HTS likely limits Hisba activities—including the founding of women's brigades—in areas of shared control in order to avoid damage to the group's social standing. In Ma'rat al-Nu'man and Saraqeb, for example, HTS has been wary of overstepping, instead opting to limit Hisba activities to providing general religious advice and guidance.

HTS's Hisba practices have repeatedly provoked confrontation with women in Idlib province. There have been a number of incidents of verbal/physical spats between Hisba members and civilians, including women. For example, in one incident a girl slapped a male Hisba preacher in the face when he tried to force her to listen to religious advice.<sup>92</sup> In Idlib City meanwhile, students and teachers at al-'Uruba school physically attacked female Hisba preachers seconded to the school after the latter attempted to interfere in their dress.<sup>93</sup> Meanwhile, a group of doctors

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***There have been a number of incidents of verbal/physical spats between Hisba members and civilians, including women.***

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<sup>87</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "HTS's female preachers" Bespoke Report, 4 – 20 March 2018

<sup>88</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS's Social Impact" Bespoke Report, 1 – 6 April 2018

<sup>89</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Sawa'id al-Khayr" Bespoke Report, 5 – 14 March 2018

<sup>90</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS's Social Impact" Bespoke Report, 2 – 6 April 2018

<sup>91</sup> "CORINTH" Network, "Women in non-education roles" Bespoke Report, 9 – 11 April 2018

<sup>92</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Sawa'id al-Khayr" Bespoke Report, 6 – 14 March 2018

<sup>93</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "Education in northern Syria" Bespoke Report, 1 – 21 March 2018

and pharmacists released a statement rejecting Hisba's intervention in hospitals, including attempts to enforce gender segregation between patients and doctors.

Perceptions of Hisba are not entirely negative, however. Several female interviewees and focus group participants in Idlib province noted that the essence of Hisba—the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice—is for them a core concept in Islam.<sup>94</sup> Likewise, due to the pre-conflict religious conservatism of the province, some women expressed sympathy with female Hisba members' mission, criticizing women who wear 'improper' clothing or too much makeup and emphasizing that gender separation in primary and secondary schools has been a long-standing practice in Syria. However, even women who were more accepting of religious policing were critical of the rude and aggressive manner of some female members of HTS's Hisba, whom they saw as so heavy-handed as to warrant local women purposely eschewing 'proper religious dress' as a form of resistance.<sup>95</sup>

### *Other HTS Social Activities and Their Impact on Women*

Because of HTS's restrictive Salafi world-view, the group's influence in the justice and governance sectors is seen as both directly and indirectly affecting women in Idlib province. Through HTS's courts network Dar al-Qada,<sup>96</sup> which at its peak encompassed 30 courts in opposition-held areas but now includes just nine active courts,<sup>97</sup> the group has managed to extend significant control over governance bodies that have the power to regulate the role of women in public life.

**Indirect impacts:** HTS's dominant position in Idlib province appears to have stifled progress made in integrating women in local governance. Despite low levels of female involvement in civilian governance institutions, LCs in Idlib recently began integrating women and setting up offices for women's issues. During focus groups, women said they saw active conflict and the growing influence of Islamist groups in Idlib as having rolled back improvements in the status of women during the revolution, such as their active roles in local councils. In Ariha, for example, the civilian LC has reportedly been hesitant to incorporate women into the council for fear of provoking an HTS response.<sup>98</sup>

**Direct Impacts:** Although interviewees asserted that women are treated more or less equally to men by HTS's justice provision bodies, they did note that far fewer women bring cases to courts than men, usually only including personal status or inheritance matters.<sup>99</sup> However, in cases where women find themselves in HTS's courts, these courts generally enforce gender-related rulings that restrict women's freedom and participation in public life.<sup>100</sup> Some religious courts and their associated security forces notably prohibit gender

<sup>94</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, North FGDs and Interviews – April 2018

<sup>95</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, North FGDs – April 2018

<sup>96</sup> In addition to these religious courts, HTS reportedly runs several security and internal courts.

<sup>97</sup> According to TSN's research supplier "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, the most important of these religious courts are located in Idlib City, Salqin, Harem, and Sarmada.

<sup>98</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, Ariha City Report – March 2018

<sup>99</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS-linked courts" Bespoke Reports, 8 – 21 March 2018

<sup>100</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, Idlib City Report, 4 – March 2018

mixing, enforce conservative dress, and have shuttered NGOs under the pretense of their having violated religious norms. In 2016, for example, HTS's court in Idlib closed down the Nisa al-Hurriya (Free Women) NGO, citing gender mixing at its headquarters.<sup>101</sup> Women's problematic access to equal justice is compounded by the lack of a written legal code, whether Syria's official legal code or the Unified Arab Code adopted by other opposition groups.<sup>102</sup> Instead, HTS's courts rely on shari'a judges' individual interpretations, which often present a further challenge to women seeking justice in such courts.

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<sup>101</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS-linked courts" Bespoke Reports, 7 – 21 March 2018

<sup>102</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS-linked courts" Bespoke Reports, 7 – 21 March 2018

## HTS's Limited Southern Presence

In contrast to the group's dominance in much of Idlib, HTS's presence in Dar'a is largely confined to a handful of military strongholds located outside major population centers. As such, the group's southern wing lacks a similar influence over society or governance bodies. Moreover, since expanding into Dar'a in 2012, the group has become increasingly isolated in the province and continues to face strong societal resistance. Over the past year, HTS has sought to regain a measure of influence through attempts at rapprochement with moderate opposition groups and local notables. Due to the saliency of tribalism—a cultural factor largely absent in Idlib—these efforts to gain influence in Dar'a have primarily revolved around winning some measure of trust from influential tribes and families. In addition to direct outreach to tribal notables, HTS has also pursued a strategy of using religious education as a means of recruitment and indoctrination among the general population, albeit to a much more limited extent than in Idlib.

### *HTS's Intervention in Secular and Religious Services in Dar'a pre-2015*

Beginning in 2012, HTS sought to exploit gaps in secular service provision in the governance, justice provision, and education sectors in an effort to spread its Salafi religious ideology. In addition to setting up courts around Dar'a, HTS intervened in formal education in Dar'a al-Balad, al-Musayfira and al-Jeeza as early as 2014.<sup>103</sup> In one notable example, HTS mobilized foreign donations for the wholesale manufacturing of 'shari'a-compliant' uniforms for schoolgirls.<sup>104</sup> The group also attempted to enforce gender segregation in some secondary schools by stationing supervisory patrols at schools.<sup>105</sup> By mid-2014, HTS had altered the curriculum in local schools, banning certain subjects from the regime's curriculum and distributing religious pamphlets to students on a weekly basis.<sup>106</sup>

In tandem with its indoctrination efforts in the education sector, in the same period HTS established control over mosques and launched religious circles that provided basic religious education and Arabic language instruction to children, exploiting a key local need.<sup>107</sup> In this same vein, the group created educational summer camps for children in hard-to-reach areas such as al-Lajat.<sup>108</sup>

However, HTS's indoctrination efforts failed to take root as its social influence—including in the education and religious education sectors—ebbed in 2015. Intense conflict with Daesh affiliate Jaysh Khaled bin al-Waleed (JKBW), the defection of a large HTS sub-group, and the relocation of more than 250 HTS fighters and leaders to northern Syria all weakened the group's overall southern posture. Furthermore, HTS's conservative religious ideology drove some among the local population to equate the group with Daesh, a factor which led to further marginalization. Therefore, as a result of a combination of societal rejection, HTS's

<sup>103</sup> "ROME" Network, "HTS's social activities in the south" Bespoke Report, 1 – 22 March 2018

<sup>104</sup> "ROME" Network, "HTS's social activities in the south" Bespoke Report, 1 – 22 March 2018

<sup>105</sup> "ROME" Network, "HTS's social activities in the south" Bespoke Report, 1 – 22 March 2018

<sup>106</sup> "ROME" Network, "HTS's social activities in the south" Bespoke Report, 1 – 22 March 2018

<sup>107</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, "HTS presence in the south" Bespoke Report, 1 – 3 April 2018

<sup>108</sup> "CONSTANTINOPLE" Network, Al-Lajat City Report, 9 – April 2018

waning military power, and top-down directives from more moderate HTS commanders,<sup>109</sup> HTS's intervention in formal education ceased and its proselytization and religious circles at mosques were limited to specific locations in the province.<sup>110</sup>

However, even when HTS was an influential actor in Dar'a, the group faced an uphill battle to expand its social influence, including in the religious education sector, where such education has historically been less common than in other provinces in Syria, including Idlib. Unlike other urban centers where Islamism was a salient touchstone, in Dar'a's tribal society, it barely registered. Rather, Dar'awi society was always rooted in tribal culture, with its conservatism largely stemming from patriarchal customs and traditions rather than religion. Whereas Salafism as a socio-religious current began gaining traction in the rural and working-class suburbs of Syria's urban centers such as Damascus and Aleppo, prior to the uprising, the closed nature of Dar'a presented a challenge to the emergence of such a movement in the south.

### *HTS's Religious Education and Indoctrination in Dar'a*

When compared to Idlib province, HTS's religious education and indoctrination activities in Dar'a province remain extremely limited. In Dar'a, HTS does not run any religious institutes or da'wa offices, restricting its avenues for indoctrination to religious study circles at HTS headquarters and proxy control of some mosques through sympathetic imams. As in Idlib, HTS's ability to conduct formal and institutionalized indoctrination activities in the south is partly a function of its level of military control and/or social influence in a given area. Emblematic of the group's current weakness in the south, HTS is only said to control mosques in al-Ghariya al-Gharbiya, Dar'a al-Balad, al-Tayba, and al-Musayfira.<sup>111</sup>

Outside of these areas, HTS's religious education and indoctrination activities are limited to distributing print media promoting HTS's religious views at mosques or checkpoints.<sup>112</sup>

Religious study circles held in HTS headquarters or at HTS-controlled mosques in the south are almost exclusively targeted at recruiting able-bodied young men, with some Quranic memorization courses also offered to children at select mosques. Mosque sermons, discussions at religious circles, and printed religious materials are reported to generally focus on core Salafi concepts, such as the importance of jihad, and do not specifically address gender. There are some indications that HTS's curriculum in the south is more basic than that in the north, and generally omits complex matters such as Islamic jurisprudence. The simplified content of HTS's religious education in the south reflects the limited scale of its indoctrination efforts

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<sup>109</sup> Early in 2015, HTS's newly appointed leader at the time, Abu Mariya al-Qahtani—who is thought to be one of the main proponents of HTS's recent turn towards pragmatism—issued a directive forbidding intervention in schools in order to bolster public support.

<sup>110</sup> "ROME" Network, "HTS's social activities in the south" Bespoke Report, 2 – 22 March 2018

<sup>111</sup> "ROME" Network, "HTS's Southern Presence" Bespoke Report – 2 April 2018

<sup>112</sup> "ROME" Network, "HTS's Southern Presence" Bespoke Report – 2 April 2018

and suggests that, in contrast to the north, Religious education in the south does not have a secondary focus on training students to later assume indoctrination roles within HTS.

### *Women and HTS's Religious Education*

The only reported instance of religious education of women in the south is led by the wives of HTS commanders in al-Musayfira, who host classes in the home of an HTS commander. The women who attend such sessions are, in the main, relatives and neighbors of the wives of HTS fighters, although the women that lead the sessions reportedly also try to persuade local women to attend by visiting their homes and offering them aid baskets as inducements.<sup>113</sup> However, this isolated instance does not appear to be part of a coordinated effort by HTS to indoctrinate women and it remains unclear whether the study sessions themselves extend beyond Quranic memorization.

### *Barriers to HTS's Religious Education in Dar'a*

The differences in HTS's indoctrination and religious education efforts in the south reflect not only the group's more limited presence in Dar'a, but also the different matrix of opportunities and constraints HTS faces in building societal influence. At the most basic level, HTS's lack of control over major population centers constitutes a major obstacle to any efforts to build a local support base. As a result, HTS has focused on trying to curry favor from influential local leaders, a strategy the group has also pursued in areas outside of its control in Idlib. In Dar'a, securing local influence is dependent on HTS's ability to build positive relations with powerful tribes and local notables, who are traditionally suspicious of outsiders, and even other Syrians. HTS may also face particularly high barriers to breaking into tribal communities as Salafism is generally alien to the South.

The relative lack of religious education opportunities targeting women in Dar'a may be linked most directly to fears of provoking conflict with local tribes, which could jeopardize HTS's already tenuous position in the south. In tribal Dar'a, women's issues are particularly sensitive, especially when it comes to women from the tribe being approached by outsiders (even other women), a fact that makes it difficult for any group to recruit women through religious education.<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, as suggested by HTS's approach in Idlib province, the group views religious education for women as a secondary effort to efforts to recruit young men. As a result, it appears that indoctrinating women is only prioritized after the group has established its ability to maintain control over large segments of the population, a dim possibility for HTS in Dar'a.

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<sup>113</sup> "ROME" Network, "HTS's Southern Presence" Bespoke Report, 5 – 2 April 2018

<sup>114</sup> "ROME" Network, "HTS's social activities in the south" Bespoke Report, 5 – 22 March 2018

## Conclusion

Per HTS's Salafi-Jihadi ideology, women's contributions as mothers and daughters are essential to realizing the group's ultimate goal of an idealized Islamic state. In practice, however, recruitment of women has not been a primary line of effort for HTS and has been largely ignored in favor of more immediate military concerns. As a result, recruitment of women has been limited to areas in Idlib province where HTS exercises relatively uncontested control. However, should opportunities arise for HTS to expand its influence or should the group shift to a more confrontational approach to social control, it is possible that the group will also dedicate more resources to the recruitment, indoctrination, and policing of women.

In Idlib, the group's approach has followed its overarching strategy of exploiting societal weakness to impose its model of governance. HTS's recruitment of women in Idlib began as uncoordinated religious education efforts led by the wives of HTS fighters, likely seeking some form of empowerment and a social outlet. As these women expanded outreach among other groups—namely family members or vulnerable women in IDP communities—some informal gatherings transitioned into more formal institutes dedicated to religious education for women, or, in the case of Sawa'id al-Khayr, da'wa and enforcement of religious restrictions on other women. With offers of humanitarian aid, improved social status, or a reliable salary, positions in more formal institutes led to the recruitment of a broader spectrum of women.

Assuming HTS continues to pursue a model of outreach to women which aims to avoid conflict with local populations, the prospects for any significant expansion in women's recruitment will depend on the emergence of social fissures in which HTS has thrived. In Idlib province in particular, the outbreak of conflict with the regime or between armed groups could conceivably create conditions leading to HTS expansion. Any conflict with either the regime or between armed groups stands to destabilize local governance bodies which have often served as bulwarks against HTS's recruitment efforts.

In the absence of any conflict-induced expansion of control, HTS may still pursue recruitment among vulnerable populations which lack the protection of strong local structures. Gaps in education and service provision—particularly among IDPs—create opportunities for HTS to meld service provision with indoctrination and recruitment. Any expansion of governance or service provision efforts, however, ultimately depends on how HTS prioritizes resources. To this end, HTS is presently less likely to expand social control efforts in the south due to the group's receding influence and singular focus on military operations. However, if influxes of IDPs from other areas in southern Syria enter into HTS-controlled territory, the group may shift priorities. In the north, HTS is comparatively more likely to continue expanding governance and service provision efforts, potentially targeting new waves of IDPs. As part of efforts to expand social control in Idlib, HTS is also likely to

continue incorporating existing ad-hoc indoctrination efforts targeting women into more formal structures such as Sawa'id al-Khayr.

The aforementioned scenarios, however, are contingent on HTS deliberately avoiding confrontation with the local population. This conciliatory approach is contested among HTS's leadership, particularly in Idlib, with hardliners arguing that the group's focus on soft power has not borne fruit. Should hardliners within HTS prevail, the group is likely to shift towards more forcefully imposing social controls. Such an approach would likely manifest in an intensification of recruitment and religious policing efforts, thereby limiting women's mobility and closing off opportunities in governance, education, and the workforce. In Idlib, Sawa'id al-Khayr is likely to be at the vanguard of any future crackdown, with HTS expanding the group's enforcement capabilities. A shift to a more confrontational mode of social control in Dar'a is comparatively less likely due to limitations on the group's resources, territorial control, and social influence.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations provide a basis for CVE programming focused on preventing women and girls' recruitment into, engagement in, and interaction with HTS's social activities by addressing the "push" and "pull" factors that shape women's engagement in HTS and create opportunities for the group to recruit, influence, or otherwise affect these populations.

***Building the capacity of women and girls to contribute to CVE:*** In the same way HTS enlists women as mobilizers and recruiters for the group, engaging women and girls as local influencers countering HTS at the grassroots level could have an equal and opposite effect. As such, CVE programming should recognize and advance the role of women and girls as vital agents for CVE responses.

- ***Equip women with skills and knowledge:*** Local women's involvement in countering HTS would require skills (communication, social media, mediation, and conflict resolution) and knowledge that would allow them to identify local pull factors and address them credibly and effectively.
- ***Building women's CVE networks:*** Women-driven CVE initiatives could be kick-started through building networks that allow them to exchange experiences, develop solutions, and mobilize resources to counter HTS. For example, an online platform connecting women in Idlib and Dar'a could be one method of encouraging the sharing of perspectives on how women have experienced Syria's conflict and their role within it. Likewise, connecting women in Dar'a with women in Idlib, who are comparatively more open to speaking about their experiences with HTS, may help encourage women in Dar'a to be more active in opposing HTS in their communities.
- ***Ensuring the safety of women involved:*** In insecure geographies such as Idlib and Dar'a, the involvement of women in counter-HTS efforts should take into account the local risks, obstacles, and security challenges women might face. Involving women openly in CVE initiatives, if not done properly, could be both dangerous and counterproductive.

### *Push Factors*

***Supporting conflict de-escalation:*** The ongoing conflict with the Syrian regime and its allies is HTS's professed raison d'être and is the main factor that has enabled the group's expansion. Outbreak of conflict has historically enabled HTS to dominate other armed groups and expand territorial control. Likewise, conflict disrupts the operation of organizations working to counter HTS both implicitly and explicitly, such as civilian governance institutions and NGOs.

***Promoting women's empowerment to combat HTS:*** A portion of HTS's success in recruiting women in Idlib may be attributed to overlap between the group's religious teachings and extant conservative cultural and religious values, such as women's role as mothers and homemakers. These shared beliefs about the appropriate role for women in society lower barriers to the acceptance and understanding of HTS's ideology. Conversely, in areas where women have transcended traditional gender barriers, including by serving in local

governance, resistance to HTS's ideology has reportedly been strongest. Promoting greater societal acceptance of women in public life may therefore help build societal resilience to current or future HTS's indoctrination efforts in Idlib and Dar'a provinces.

- ***Engage male leaders in women's empowerment:*** Male leaders remain the main power-brokers in society. Any efforts to promote acceptance of women's participation in governance and public life will therefore necessitate support and buy-in from these male leaders. Recruiting support from male leaders for women's empowerment could be achieved through encouraging dialogue between male and female community leaders and supporting the allotment of positions in local governance structures for female leaders.
- ***Encourage active roles for women's offices in empowering women:*** Most local councils in Idlib and Dar'a have offices specifically for women's affairs, however these offices vary in their capabilities and responsibilities, with some existing only on paper. Encouraging a more active role for these offices can help empower other women in the community through including women in governance and sponsoring initiatives to increase women's participation in governance and the workforce.

***Supporting local structures as a method to counter HTS:*** In both Idlib and Dar'a, HTS has been unable to expand outreach to women in areas with strong local structures, such as local councils in Idlib and tribal councils in Dar'a. Supporting these structures' ability to resist HTS could therefore be an effective means to closing off very specific entry points for HTS's outreach to women.

- ***Provide support to LCs in Idlib:*** Areas in Idlib with LCs that enjoy a strong popular mandate—such as Ma'rat al-Nu'man—have also proven to be the most resilient to HTS encroachments. Helping fill gaps that HTS could exploit to gain influence over local councils, such as financial challenges or shortcomings in education or justice provision, will therefore help these councils preserve their independence and continue to resist HTS.
- ***Provide support to tribal structures in Dar'a:*** The dominance of tribal structures in Dar'a was believed to be one of the main factors forestalling HTS's expansion in the province. Tribal structures have emerged as pillars of social stability that could help serve as alternative modes of social organization in Dar'a during conflict stabilization, thereby helping to support community resilience. However, tribal structures were also identified as the main obstacle to improving gender norms. Any support to tribal notables' councils should therefore be paired with efforts to engage influential women within tribal communities and incorporate these women into leadership roles within notables' councils and their communities.

#### ***Pull Factors***

***Preventing outreach to women through family members:*** Most women recruited into HTS or opportunities offered by HTS, such as religious education, are motivated by familial ties to

HTS. Effectively countering HTS recruitment among women therefore requires countering HTS's recruitment among other gender groups.

- ***Support organizations providing primary education:*** In areas of Idlib where opportunities for primary education are either absent or under-resourced, most notably in IDP camps, schools run by HTS are sometimes the only option for basic education. However, HTS also uses these schools to indoctrinate and recruit both children and families. Providing alternative options for basic education in these areas will therefore close gaps HTS has repeatedly exploited.
- ***Support employment programs for youth:*** In both Idlib and Dar'a, unemployment is seen as a major driver of young men's engagement in armed groups. Supporting alternative opportunities for employment for young men is therefore an important step in preventing engagement in armed groups, including HTS. With fewer men joining HTS, fewer women will be exposed to HTS or feel pressured to support the group.

***Preventing exploitation of financial need:*** Financial need is seen as a principal driver for women's engagement with HTS. For some women, particularly within IDP communities, benefits such as food aid or the promise of employment in HTS or HTS-affiliated institutions are important incentives for attending religious education classes. These become especially important for vulnerable women such as IDPs and widows. Effectively countering HTS recruitment among women, as well as female participation in HTS activities, requires addressing women's financial and humanitarian needs.

- ***Support women's economic productivity:*** International donors and CSO programming should include a focus on supporting women's economic productivity for the dual purpose of facilitating their participation in the workforce in Idlib and Dar'a and undermining HTS's efforts to exploit their financial need. Targeted distribution of small-scale grants—or micro-credit programs—to vulnerable women, especially sole breadwinners, could provide them with the financial resources to start their own businesses and reduce their dependency on outside sources, such as HTS, for their livelihood.
- ***Deliver sufficient and gender-sensitive humanitarian aid:*** Addressing the immediate needs of vulnerable women in a gender-sensitive manner would also undermine one of the ways by which HTS recruits the participation of women in its religious education and outreach. In delivering aid, humanitarian organization should take into account the different vulnerabilities of men and women resulting from disparities in their socially constructed gender roles.

***Offering alternatives methods of social support:*** A desire for belonging and community was seen as a driver for some women's participation in HTS's social activities, particularly among IDPs and the wives of HTS fighters, who are often ostracized within local communities.

Providing alternative methods of social support and community-building for these women could help address feelings of isolation that drive some women to engage with HTS.

- **Provide training and resources for psychosocial support for women:** Most women in Idlib and Dar'a lack access to psychosocial support, such as mental health counseling and support groups. While some organizations, particularly in Idlib, offer various types of psychosocial support, providers often lack resources and reach. Supporting the expansion of psychosocial support opportunities in Idlib and Dar'a will help provide alternative forms of social engagement for women likely to be targeted for recruitment into HTS, such as IDP women, and can serve as a safe space for women in communities affected by HTS.
- **Support initiatives to increase understanding between IDPs and local communities:** Conflict between IDP communities and local host communities is reported to have created conditions that facilitate HTS's efforts to build influence among IDP communities in Idlib. Supporting conflict resolution programs and initiatives that bring together IDP and host community women may help reduce inter-communal tensions and help these women to build a sense of community.

**Promoting alternative narratives that address female involvement in HTS:** The sense of community and contribution to a higher purpose that engagement in HTS offers women may be a compelling reason for some to engage with the group. However, many FGD participants expressed strong opposition to HTS because of the group's regressive views and actions towards women's participation in public life. Leveraging these perspectives as counter-narratives could be one way of countering HTS's indoctrination efforts writ large.

- **Create online and offline C-HTS messaging content:** HTS's Salafi-Jihadi discourse provided through its religious education offers a sense of empowerment to women as key contributors to a worthy cause. Social media messaging that amplifies attacks, abuses, and restrictions imposed by HTS against women and girls could counter HTS's narrative. Counter-narratives should also provide positive and tangible alternatives for women, such as contribution to charitable work, development, etc.
- **Involve female community leaders in C-HTS messaging:** Involving women civil society leaders can enhance the success of efforts that seek to prevent the recruitment and radicalization of women and girls. HTS's indoctrination of women utilizes local social networks in its outreach, therefore only female community leaders could effectively design programs and C-HTS material that would resonate among women locally. Former female HTS supporters could help formulate and convey these narratives in a more relatable and resonant way.



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# THE STABILISATION NETWORK

