

# Syria in Transition



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Welcome to Syria in Transition (SiT), a monthly delve into policy-relevant developments concerning the Syrian conflict. Crafted by practitioners with a decade-long experience in the field, SiT offers informed perspectives tailored for diplomats and decision makers. SiT goes straight to the point and shuns unnecessary verbiage – just as we would prefer as avid readers ourselves.

Covered in the current issue:

- 1 **Making hay as Gaza burns**  
Concern over neutrality rewards for Assad
- 2 **The unyielding emirate**  
Understanding Qatar's Syria policy
- 4 **Deal of the Century**  
Why the West should come to terms with China
- 5 **Assad's invisible hand**  
Countering the regime's dismissal of transitional justice
- 7 **Jolani battles dissidents**  
HTS purge sign of shifting policy

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## Making hay as Gaza burns

Concern over neutrality rewards for Assad

Two earthquakes hit Syria in 2023. The first was an act of nature that brought misery to an already war-ravaged people but relief to the Assad regime. 'Crisis diplomacy' became an opportunity for Arab states to advance normalisation with Damascus and for international donors to reaffirm their self-imposed bias in favour of working with the official government, regardless of its deliberate mismanagement and atrocious record. The second earthquake was man-made: Hamas' attack on Israel and the subsequent Israeli offensive on Gaza. This war shook a region that was considered by the US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan to be "quieter today than it has been in two decades." Here too, the Assad regime appears to be making hay by leveraging its undeclared neutrality in the Gaza war for sanctions relief and economic assistance. A "reward for neutrality" scheme appears to be unfolding, and it worries diplomats in Europe and the region because it raises difficult questions about how the West should balance its commitment to a comprehensive political solution for Syria, as per UNSCR 2254, which requires maintaining pressure on Assad, with its desire to prevent further state collapse in regime areas.

Since the 7 October attack the Assad regime has maintained a position of "negative neutrality." Despite its vocal hostility towards Israel, Damascus prohibited pro-Gaza protests and limited cross-border acts of solidarity to a few badly-aimed mortar rounds and rockets. The regime did not respond to the hundreds of Israeli air strikes on Iranian-affiliated groups and their infrastructure in Syria, while maintaining its shelling of Idlib. This has not merely been a passive reaction to Israel's threats to 'keep out of it'. Rather,

it has been an active attempt by Damascus to present itself as a helpful asset in times of crisis.

Other regional regimes have played a similar game. Gulf states that were on the path of normalisation with Israel, and who maintained a healthy distance from any step that could be construed as escalation, have already received rewards, a prime example being the dropping by Germany of its veto on Eurofighter sales to Saudi Arabia and an intensification of German and French diplomatic engagement with Riyadh on regional de-escalation measures.

Those in the European foreign policy establishment who have been pushing for increased engagement with Damascus now appear to be seizing on this opportunity to reward Syria for its neutrality. Of course, Assad is desperate for this: so much so that he has started announcing cosmetic changes to his regime that could be used by advocates of engagement to justify concessions in his direction. This includes an aspirational goal of having an all-volunteer army; a potential merger of some security branches and the closing of others such as the notorious Palestine Branch; and the creation of a “secretariat-general for the presidency” to replace the Ministry for Presidential Affairs. For the gullible, the logic of reciprocal concessions between Damascus and the West, advocated since 2019 by some think tanks and the UN Special Envoy, is finally reaping results. The regime’s reform-oriented announcements, coming at a time when Syria has stayed out of the Gaza fray, may be rewarded with easing of sanctions, more trips to Damascus by European diplomats, and more reconstruction-lite developmental assistance to a level that was regarded until quite recently as an EU red line. To placate the critics, Europeans may double down on their rhetoric on accountability and UNSCR 2254. European diplomatic sources have expressed concern that this year’s Brussels donor conference could be the stage for such public posturing, effectively masking more engagement with Assad.

Rewarding Assad in this way would be a win for those Europeans who regard him as the actor best placed to preserve the Syrian state and manage the refugee file. If tacit alliances with dictators are not a red line in North Africa, why should they be in the eastern Mediterranean? Additionally, some believe that keeping Assad in place maintains a bulwark against Iranian escalation emanating from Syrian territory, despite the deployment of tens of thousands of IRGC-affiliated militiamen there. The neutrality rewards scenario

aligns with a series of other developments: appointment of regime-leaning personnel in several European development ministries; UN aid chief Martin Griffiths’ proposal to establish a new UN fund for early recovery assistance tailored to regime and GCC specifications; repeated visits by Syria’s State Security chief Husam Luka to Riyadh; and recent armed incursions into Jordan orchestrated by Maher Assad who is reportedly unhappy that discussions between Damascus and Riyadh included the fate of his 4th Division.

Whether and to what extent “rewards for neutrality” materialises depends on the assertiveness of seasoned and more principled forces in the European foreign policy establishment. It also hinges on whether more credible ideas emerge to address the European dilemma of how to help civilians in need without bolstering a regime that is the root cause of civilian suffering. Presently, the discussion about badly-needed early recovery assistance is between the West and Damascus. What is needed is a shift to a whole-of-Syria approach that regards all areas of control as equally deserving of humanitarian assistance and the required engagement with authorities to implement it effectively. After all, none of the *de facto* authorities are any less legitimate than the Assad regime – and support to some may even strengthen Europe’s hands rather than weaken it.

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## The unyielding emirate

### Understanding Qatar’s Syria policy

Qatar is unique in its resolute non-normalisation policy towards the Assad regime – which might sound counterintuitive given the emirate’s attempts to position itself as a major hub of mediation in the Arab world. Qatar is not alien to reconsidering foreign policy positions in general. Emir Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani, who succeeded his father Hamad in 2013, normalised with Egypt after years of strained relations, for example. The Saudi pressure that played a role in that decision did not, however, convince Tamim to normalise relations with Damascus. Qatar was not in a position

to prevent Assad's return to the Arab League in May 2023, but when Assad took the floor in Jeddah, Emir Tamim walked out. Even when Qatar's most important ally, the United States, gave a tacit green light to Arab normalisation, or when its second most important ally, Turkey, opened dialogue with the regime in December 2022, Doha did not use the occasion to explore options for engagement with Damascus. Against this background, Qatar's *Sonderweg* presents a riddle to many observers, who fall back on the lazy explanation that cites Doha's support for Islamist groups.

### Regional sheikh

To understand Qatar's policy towards Syria, it is essential to understand the broader underpinnings of its foreign policy. The key context is Qatar's transformation from relative poverty to immense wealth, and the resultant threat of predation by powerful neighbours. Two key objectives have resulted: maintaining a regional balance of power; and a commitment to international law. The 2017–21 Arab blockade showed just how vulnerable the country was, and in response, Emir Tamim has diversified Qatar's supply chains and strategic alliances. The United States is the lynchpin of Qatar's security and in March 2022 designated it a "major non-NATO ally" – a title so far withheld from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. With a view to the regional balance of power, meanwhile, Qatar has cultivated ties with Iran, China, and notably Turkey. This has included an enhancement of the 2014 defence pact with Ankara involving the deployment of up to 5,000 troops at the emirate's Tariq bin Ziyad base. Normalisation with Assad threatens to upset the regional balance of power by undermining the US and Turkish positions.

International law acts as an important line of defence for small nations like Qatar. Assad is a serial abuser of international law and so are his principal allies Russia and Iran. Abiding by and upholding UN resolutions, conventions on human rights and prohibited weapons, accountability (Qatar had a key role in the establishment of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism [IIIM]), and the right to self-determination, form the basis of much of Qatar's public diplomacy. A Qatari *volte-face* on Syria would undermine its own rhetoric on, and resort to, international law.

Beyond mere survival, Qatar also wants to be a player in its own right, notably as a major centre of regional diplomacy – a role for which it receives Western support. This has led to inaccurate and – from Doha's perspective – unflattering comparisons with Swit-

zerland. The Qatari concept of mediation involves an activist role in which it presents innovative proposals steeped in the political culture and psychology of the region and puts cash on the table to lubricate peace deals. The 2008 Doha Agreement on Lebanon and the 2017 Four Towns deal in Syria are prime examples of its approach. In essence, Doha assumes the role of the tribal sheikh: a respected, beneficent, and shrewd arbiter who is the ultimate embodiment of soft power in Arab societies. When dealing with a feud, the sheikh may pay money out of his own pocket to secure peace. This also helps to explain Qatar's rejection of normalisation with Assad. Emir Tamim, during efforts to de-escalate the conflict in 2011, extended generous payments to the regime in pursuit of peace. Assad, however, took the money but proved unwilling to compromise an inch. This led Qatar to perceive Assad as a disrespectful and untrustworthy actor unwilling to adhere to Arab political norms. Any something-for-nothing normalisation with Damascus, devoid of genuine negotiation, would mean siding with one party against another – a grave risk to a sheikh's credibility and prestige.

### Untapped potential

Viewed from the perspectives of regional balance of power, international law, and its unique mediator role, Qatar's policy of non-normalisation makes sense. Qatar's stance is a useful reminder that effective diplomacy requires not only a willingness to engage with all parties, but also credibility. It intersects neatly, meanwhile, with the European policy of strategic patience on Syria (which is not without its challenges.) Qatar is broadly aligned with the European 'three noes' policy and has cooperated with the Europeans in advocating stronger push back on the Assad regime at the UN. Unsurprisingly, Doha views clandestine talks between some EU member states and Damascus with a mixture of irritation and concern.

Doha, it should be remembered, possesses an asset that is diminishing in the EU but remains essential for maintaining the EU's policy of strategic patience: substantial financial resources for humanitarian aid. Qatar wants to deepen humanitarian cooperation with Europeans, underlined by its successful funding, with Europe and the US, of the White Helmets. While co-funding through UN agencies exists, there is significant untapped potential for Qatari involvement in politically-sensitive early recovery projects. Recent Qatari pledges of \$2 million to the Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS), an FCDO-initiated pooled fund

independent of the UN, indicates that Doha is testing the waters for deeper collaboration on northwest Syria. To consolidate the non-normalisation camp, and strengthen European stakes in Syria, such cooperation is an opportunity worth seizing.

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## Deal of the Century

Why the West should come to terms with China

The decline of US (i.e. Western) power in the Middle East is fast becoming a sad spectacle. The US air strikes against the Houthis in Yemen following their piracy in one of the world's main maritime trade routes is the latest assault by a global power whose military capabilities are immense but whose wrath is no longer feared – not even by a war-ravaged failed state. Like everyone else, the Houthis can see that Washington is dangerously stretched by commitments to Europe and the Far East to counter Russia and China, and that it can ill afford a costly and likely messy entanglement with Iran and its growing number of proxies. Tehran's success in civil wars in the last twenty or so years has given it strong stakes in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Gaza; and armed confrontations with the US are now happening in all of these territories in a 'death by a thousand cuts' strategy. The goal it seems is to goad the US into ever more costly commitments with a view to eventually extracting US recognition of Iranian dominance of the region. New technologies and tactics developed by Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) have helped it level the playing field – at least for short bursts of fighting. More importantly in the geopolitical context, however, is support from China and Russia that encourages Tehran to grow in confidence and dictate the escalatory tempo. In the West, the popular wisdom today is that any aggressive US measure, such as a war with the Houthis or with Hezbollah, would lead to a political defeat that would shred what is left of US credibility as a global hegemon; and that Washington would be well advised to resort to diplomacy (read: a deal with Tehran) thereby saving much blood and treasure.

That the US cannot or will not contain Iran has already shaped the foreign policies of several impor-

tant regional actors, chief amongst them Saudi Arabia. Its turn to Beijing points to a growing realisation that the global world is moving towards bipolarity, with the US leading the Western camp and China leading a Eurasian/Global South camp. As in the Cold War era, conflicts today cannot be decided easily by one party (e.g. Libya, Syria, Yemen, Gaza); and successful political settlements require the cooperation of both camps. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman shrewdly recognised that only Chinese influence could put a check on Iranian aggression against his country. There is a lesson here for the West: rather than seeking separate deals with Khamenei or Putin, the West should go straight to Xi Jinping – and for a deal on the world, not only the Middle East. The goal should be a new global world order that recognises China as the equal of the United States. The simple fact is that the growth of China economically, militarily, and politically is unstoppable, however hard the West attempts to check it through protectionism and containment. At any rate, it will lead only to a cycle of economic countermeasures and a dangerous arms race. In any event, the West needs China as a trading partner and an upholder of international law – the basis of the 'rules-based order' that the West claims it is fighting to defend.

A grand bargain between Washington and Beijing will need to be comprehensive if it is to succeed. In the Middle East, the Israel/Palestine and Syrian conflicts could be settled, Iran's nuclear ambitions curtailed, and the sovereignty of the Gulf Arab states guaranteed. For this to happen, the US would have to learn to "share the region" with China, and this means a Chinese military presence that, together with the already significant US presence, would be sufficient to maintain stability.

In Ukraine, Chinese influence is badly needed to bring Russia to heel. A negotiated peace guaranteed by the US and China is the only way to end the futile, WWI-style conflict in a face-saving manner for all concerned. Crucially, it would diminish Putin and establish a permanent buffer to Russian expansionism. This is a priority for Europe, whose enthusiasm for supporting Ukraine is fading and is being replaced by a new hard-nosed realism.

In the Asia-Pacific region, the West's bet on India is misguided because it will only empower an authoritarian and anti-Western Hindu nationalist regime expert at playing both sides of the fence. Instead, the

US should seek an understanding with China on what really matters in that region: free trade through its maritime waterways and peace between India and Pakistan.

In the Far East, a difficult but pragmatic trade-off should be made: settlement of the Taiwanese question in return for settlement of the Korean question. A political solution for Taiwan would be sufficient to deflate China's aggressive strategy in the South China Sea, while the reunification of the Korean peninsula under democracy and capitalism would require the dismantling of the North Korean regime and its nuclear stockpile – a task only China can undertake.

Critics could point to many gaping holes in this vision for a new world order. China might not want to play the role of co-world policeman, which entails too many commitments in places in which it has not demonstrated much interest. It can simply sit back, enjoy the spectacle of US missteps, and pick up the pieces, as it has already been doing. Whether Russia or Iran would accept their second-class status is questionable. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to a pragmatic accommodation with China, however, is the West's inability to manage its own decline. Foreign policy circles on both sides of the Atlantic remain stubbornly neoliberal in outlook, adhering to the idea that international rivalry among great powers could still be overcome through economic integration. But China's entry into the WTO in 2001 did not herald an era of peace and goodwill. Many in the US defence establishment now regard a hot war with China as inevitable, and assert that the answer is building even greater numbers of missiles and ships.

The recipe of the 1990s has manifestly failed; and a new paradigm is needed to ensure peace in our time. As crucial as it is, that paradigm shift is unlikely to occur under an administration in Washington whose foreign policy leaders are discredited by the reversals of the past two decades and remain beholden to "the blob." For the shift to happen, the West needs a US leader with a keener sense of global power politics and a readiness to make counter-intuitive decisions that cut across the familiar and reassuring. The West needs a US president who can negotiate a deal for the 21st Century.

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## Assad's invisible hand

### Countering the regime's dismissal of transitional justice

'Innovative' accountability is the West's go-to instrument when it comes to advancing transitional justice in Syria. To this end, the West has supported the work of Syrian NGOs such as the Syrian Network for Human Rights, international organisations such as the Centre for International Justice and Accountability (CIJA), and UN bodies like the Commission of Inquiry, the Institution for Missing Persons, the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), and the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM). These efforts maintain the pressure on Assad and his backers, support future Syrian legal proceedings and the few possible third country trials (mainly in Germany and France), and establish reference points for truth-seeking. Truth-seeking, however, goes beyond forensically establishing facts in a court of law; and it intersects with a reconciliation that aims to harmonise diverse truths and create a pluralistic consciousness of the past and present. Ideally resulting in a broad acceptance of accountability as a just measure, this holistic approach forms the basis of transitional justice, itself contributing to a non-retributive society capable of coming to terms with its past.

#### Monopoly on truth

The Assad regime understands the importance of manipulating the three pillars of transitional justice (truth-seeking, accountability, reconciliation) and works at misusing them to reproduce its authoritarian rule. According to an informed source, in a meeting with the UN Special Envoy in 2022, Foreign Minister Faisal Mikdad expressed interest in learning more about the South African reconciliation process. He made sure to confine the conversation to reconciliation only, sidestepping the truth-seeking and accountability parts that formed the essence of the South African experience. The regime has twisted the term reconciliation to breaking point, treating it as an act of submission by a wayward individual to a beneficent master. Those offered reconciliation must sign a document denouncing so-called traitors and promising never again to rise up "against the state." Reconciling with the state, however, does not equal safety. Different *mukhabarat* branches have their own lists of wanted persons, so rearrests are common. In Assad's Syria, reconciliation is just a way of submitting to the



regime's arbitrary justice – and for Syrians wishing to avoid exile, this is often the only viable option.

Genuine and nation-wide reconciliation appears distant, given the ongoing conflict and a stalled political process. Growing up in a dictatorship with determined friend/enemy distinctions, and a state narrative of being in constant existential struggle with external enemies (Israel, Western imperialism), many Syrians unwillingly identify with the zero-sum logic that has been forced on them; and the gruesome events of the past 13 years surely have confirmed the self-fulfilling prophecy of existential war that the regime has promoted. Breaking free from this zero-sum mentality that rules out power sharing starts with developing a consciousness of how the regime fabricates reality.

The official narrative of the Islamist uprising in the late 1970s and early 1980s highlights the regime's consistent portrayal of internal conflicts as the result of foreign plots aimed at plunging Syria into sectarian chaos. In a speech on 22 December 1979 Hafiz Assad categorised oppositionists as either misguided (and therefore salvageable) or serving foreign masters (rendering them beyond salvation.) Similarly, a speech by Bashar Assad on 17 July 2014 stressed how conspiratorial forces steered individuals down a destructive path, and framed unrestrained state violence as an inevitable (and therefore legitimate) response to an existential threat. Impunity gives rise to ideological-sectarian victim narratives, for example of Alawites facing Sunni partisans that are part of a regressive conspiracy supported by international Zionism and imperialist forces; which in turn nurtures Sunni Arab victim narratives of being at the mercy of tyrannical Alawite minority rule. Instead of engaging in a national dialogue about these issues, most Syrians remain silent, while others seek revenge through violence.

The omnipresence of an existential threat has been foundational in the Baath Party's political ideology. The climate of permanent enmity not only sustains authoritarianism but shapes social norms and practices that continue to affect the thought processes of Syrians everywhere. In regime areas, the prevalence of impunity and tight control over truth makes genuine reconciliation impossible – not least because the Assad family's reign was never built on consensus or conciliation to begin with. Enmity between sectarian groups was a real phenomenon rooted in the Ottoman experience and intensified during the French

Mandate. Successive governments of the 1946–1963 'bourgeois democracy' period failed to implement any genuine nation-building programme, and the Assads would exploit this in their divide-and-rule games. The regime's 1980 decision to grant legal impunity to members of the security forces was rooted in a genuine existential fear among Alawites that was used to justify extreme – and illegal – measures on grounds of communal self-preservation. The same logic holds true today.

### **Beyond flawed reconciliation**

The regime is smart enough to admit "mistakes" on rare occasions. In his July 2011 speech, Bashar acknowledged state wrongdoings related to the crackdown of the 1980s. He stated that, "generations are still paying the price for that period (...) We held certain individuals responsible for the mistakes of other individuals – which is not right." However, this should not be construed as any genuine interest in truth-seeking, reconciliation, or accountability. Bashar's admissions are confined to cases where individuals were denied government employment on political grounds, and similar cases where responsibility could easily be pinned on over-zealous bureaucrats. The aim was to deflect attention from the systemic violence unleashed by the political leadership. For the regime, such controlled criticism is what passes as a "national opposition."

Another characteristic of the regime's approach is its merciful attitude towards militants who submit, i.e. "reconcile." The offer of reconciliation comes with a promise of impunity, as long as the rebels – including those from arch-enemies like Islamic State and the Nusra-Front/Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – pledge to conduct violence on behalf of the regime. This has been most evident in Daraa, scene of the 2018 large-scale "reconciliation" process. Structural impunity of this kind is causing future generations to be socialised in a culture of violence that perpetuates authoritarian social norms that may extend far beyond the lifetime of the Assad regime.

The regime actively promotes this constructed reality to shape citizens into compliant entities of the 'violent state.' Understanding the necessity of maintaining this false reality, the regime carefully employs historical narratives in formal education programmes and social activities. Long-time presidential adviser Bouthaina Shaaban's Al-Watan ["the nation"] Foundation aims to shape Syrian history by curating oral testimonies of loyalist suffering during the war. The dominant nar-

rative in all these testimonies places the responsibility for violence entirely on external actors, stifling discourse on state violence and conflict within Syrian society. When the recognition of suffering becomes futile, and addressing guilt a social taboo, truth-seeking, reconciliation, and accountability become meaningless.

To counter the regime's core narrative of existential struggle, it is crucial to introduce inclusive narratives and practices that disrupt established patterns of thought. Early in the revolution, some Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) pursued this vision, but their idealism tended to paper over ethnic and sectarian divisions rather than overcome them. Today, with Syria effectively divided into three areas of control (Alawite, Sunni, Kurd), there is space to address the overdue question of national reconciliation i.e. nation-building. While calls for decentralisation are made by some advocacy groups, caution is warranted. It would replicate a tried-and-failed model implemented under the French Mandate; and it is unlikely that de-centralisation alone would be sufficient to end violent conflict. Focusing on governance in the peripheries while sidelining the crucial political question of the "centre" may even exacerbate violence. The problem should be dealt with head on. Deeply-rooted ethnic and sectarian divides – often interlinking with class issues – that legitimise violence and encourage impunity should be discussed in an honest and serious manner. Syrians can start this process of seeking historical truth, advancing accountability, and reconciling among themselves within areas beyond Assad's control, regardless of the regime's or external actors' engagement. Breaking free from the invisible chains of Baathist thought-control is the first step towards full-spectrum transitional justice.

[This is part II of a series of articles on advancing transitional justice in Syria. Find part I in the December 2023 issue.](#)

## Jolani battles dissidents

### HTS purge sign of shifting policy

Abu Ahmad Zakour is a renegade Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) commander who is on the run. After witnessing the arrest of many of his close allies and associates in a wide-sweeping purge of suspected spies and traitors, Zakour (real name: Jihad Issa al-Shaikh) fled to where he thought he would be safe. Held by the rival Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), Azaz looked promising. Zakour in fact had for years managed HTS relations with the SNA and was on good terms with many of its commanders. But not much of the opposition-held northwest is safe from the long arm of Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, the leader of HTS. On 19 December, he sent a snatch squad to Zakour's hideout in Azaz. After a brief, late evening firefight, the defector was bungled into the boot of a 4X4 and driven in a convoy at speed towards Idlib past unsuspecting SNA checkpoints. It looked like he was doomed until, like in a Turkish mafia TV series, armoured vehicles belonging to MIT intercepted the convoy. The Turkish agents were not pleased with HTS brazenly kidnapping people in areas under their direct control. Zakour was saved, but only just.

### Competing wings

Several factors make Zakour's defection noteworthy. The first is timing. HTS has had its fair share of defectors. Some have even taken to X to voice harsh criticisms of the HTS leader, accusing him of corruption and of doing the West's bidding as well as that of Russia and Turkey. Many of these defections, however, took place pre-2018, before the years of consolidation and restructuring that saw the governance of Idlib improve and Jolani's power increase. Criticism of HTS by these defectors was seen largely as sour grapes on the part of low level operatives. The same charge could not be levelled at Zakour. Until a few weeks ago he was one of Jolani's key lieutenants with responsibilities for finance and external relations. Zakour did not go quietly. Immediately after the failed kidnapping, he released a five-minute voice message that was widely circulated on WhatsApp cursing Jolani and exposing damaging secrets about him. This was the first time that a ranking HTS member had so publicly 'flipped'.

The second factor making Zakour's defection noteworthy is what it reveals about HTS' structure. The organisation is not homogeneous. Rather, it is an

alliance of various region-based (i.e. Aleppo, Daraa, Damascus, etc.) factions of what was known as Jabhat al-Nusra, which accepted Jolani's strategy of moderation and pragmatism in return for a slice of the Idlib cake. The province has come a long way economically and administratively, and with that have come significant revenue streams that the factions were given to administer. The main cleavage within HTS is native vs outsider. Jolani relied heavily on the outsiders (i.e. not native to Idlib) to fight Islamic State cells and extremist splinter groups like Hurras al-Deen, and in return he awarded them important positions. Zakour was the leader of the Aleppo faction of HTS – one of the outsiders – as was his close associate Abu Maria al-Qahtani, leader of the Deir Ezzor “eastern bloc” and long regarded as Jolani's deputy. The Damascus bloc exists but is weak after its leader, the wily Abu Malik al-Tali, was sidelined in 2020. Two blocs hold most of the power within HTS today: the Hama bloc led by “Abu Hasan 600”; and more so the Idlib bloc, led by Qutayba Badawi, aka “Al-Mughira Binnish.” The natives claim that the outsiders were plotting to overthrow Jolani, and that their campaign of mass arrests of allies and associates of Qahtani and Zakour was in defence of the organisation. Qahtani was detained in August 2023 and is believed to be dead. Meanwhile, following his failed kidnapping, Zakour relocated to an SNA base in Ras al-Ayn, the furthest point from Idlib in opposition-held territory.

### Spy games

The third factor that makes Zakour's defection interesting was his admission – the first from an insider – of what was already widely believed: that HTS cooperated with the CIA and other Western intelligence agencies against Islamic State and Hurras al-Deen. Interviewed by an opposition newspaper, Zakour affirmed that Jolani had, “opened HTS' prisons to British and American intelligence”, and that the HTS leader was proud of his “beautiful relations with the Americans.”

Cracks began to emerge last summer when HTS' security arm arrested 300 persons in Idlib in what HTS sources said was a mass bust of US and Russian spies and intelligence cells that had been secretly operating in Idlib for years without Jolani's knowledge. Those arrested included apparatchiks in the Salvation Government and HTS administrators, field commanders, and security men, as well as HTS's deputy chief, Qahtani. Speculation is rife over who may have tipped off Jolani about these networks and why.

Then, in early January, social media accounts close to HTS published what were described as Qahtani's “confessions”, which included his admission that since 2018 he had been an agent for the “International Coalition operations room in the city of Erbil”, and that for the past two years he had been plotting a coup against Jolani timed for late 2024. The goal was said to be to hand control of the northwest to the US and the eventual surrender of the southern half of Idlib to Russia and the regime. The narrative is all too convenient, especially when you consider that it was Jolani who had given Qahtani the task of liaising with the CIA and other Western intelligence agencies in the first place. It wasn't only Qahtani, however: there was a team of emissaries that managed various aspects of the HTS-West relationship.

That intelligence agencies should seek to develop networks of informants inside HTS separate from any formal cooperation mechanism is to be expected; and that Qahtani may have been turned by his handlers is not at all unlikely. Jolani is a veteran of the jihadi game and something of a Machiavellian operator. He would have understood that legitimising contacts with Western government agencies that were considered enemies until just a few years previously, could foster cynicism within the ranks that would increase the risk of infiltration. The purge of Qahtani, Zakour, *et al* may have been a pre-emptive strike against disloyal elements; but it was also a removal of those who had managed security cooperation with the West. When a state does this, it is usually interpreted as a sign that it no longer wants cooperation. That might not be entirely true in the case of Jolani, who will have wanted to avoid being left at the mercy of Turkey, his sole remaining sponsor. Accordingly, a recalibration of that “beautiful” relationship may now be in order. Jolani's return on his investment, over five years, in moderation and pragmatism has been modest, with no sign that he or his group will ever be removed from the terrorism list. His hopes of being recognised as a responsible actor with a legitimate political role in Syria's future appear doomed.

In Idlib, the Islamic morality police are back.