

A Deconstruction of the Discourse of Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, Caliph of Hei'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), Idlib, Syria

Crisis Group published its conversation with al-Jolani titled “The Jihadist Factor in Syria’s Idlib: A Conversation with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani” and I have used the published statements made by al-Jolani in this conversation, to deconstruct and unearth his discourse. Al-Jolani places himself within the Salafi-Jihadi school of jurisprudence of Sunni Islam, but is insisting on a new approach to Jihad, that places him at odds with both Islamic State and Al Qaeda. Al-Jolani insists that realities on the ground in the Jihad, against the munafique (hypocrites of Islam) and the kaffirun (unbelievers) in a Muslim nation, must dictate the operational strategies of this Jihad. In Syria, the Jihad is called for against a regime and its supporters who are Muslims formally but in practice are of the munafique, the Sunni hypocrites of Islam, and their kaffirun allies as the Alawites, the Shi’a Iranians and the Russians. Jihad against the munafique and the kaffirun of Syria is then mandatory on all Sunni Muslims, the grave issue is then operational strategies and objectives. In the Syrian terrain of Jihad there must be unity, common purpose, a common objective and a common strategy to attain this end amongst the Sunni Muslims engaged in Jihad, and to attain this al-Jolani is willing and able to cleanse the movement of Jihad of all recalcitrant leaders and groups. He has indicated this propensity with his assault on Islamic State, his ability to coerce Hurras al-Din, and to deal with disparate voices in his own organization, HTS. His war on Islamic State arises from the intransigence of Islamic State towards the order al-Jolani demands in Idlib province, where Islamic State is willing to attack the Assad regime, the Turks, the Russians, the Iranians and the US forces thereby precipitating a quagmire as Afghanistan and Iraq which al-Jolani does not want. Al-Jolani is willing to discipline any Sunni Muslim group in the Jihad who dares to use Idlib province as an operational terrain in the pursuit of international Jihad against the forces of specific nations, namely the USA and Turkey in Idlib and to launch international attacks on any nation from Idlib province.

What does al-Jolani want? He wants a Syria under the hegemony of the Salafi-Jihadi school of jurisprudence where his agenda will be revealed in all its glory, to the detriment of the Shi’a in the region. At minimum he wants a liberated Idlib province under the hegemony of HTS and to attain this minimum end, he will dance with the kaffirun to attain this end by any means necessary. His strategy calls for presenting himself and his HTS as the only effective ally the West has in Syria, to halt the process of reintegrating Syrian territory under the hegemony of the Assad regime, by effectively halting their advance on Idlib province with their support. Then through his rule of liberated territory in Idlib, to consolidate, rebuild and become the clarion call for Jihad to the Ummah of the world for the liberation of the rest of Syria. Al-Jolani expects that the West wants Assad toppled from power so earnestly, that they will aid and abet the creation of Jolani’s caliphate in Idlib, the new clarion call for world Jihad to the Ummah.

A Jihad that serves the interests of both the West and Salafi-Jihadi desire for hegemony over Islam in the 21st century. Al-Jolani has learnt well from the discursive agents who created the Jihad of Afghanistan, against the kaffirun Afghan regime and its kaffirun Russian invader and hopes to repeat the creation of the same said alliance against Assad, the Alawite, the Russians and the Shi'a of Iran. In his mind, a potent cocktail that poses a grave threat to the West primarily because of Russian involvement according to his reading of the discourses of geo-politics of the West at present, the basis of the snake oil that he peddles to the West. In his interview with Crisis Group, his lips are dripping honey reserved only for the kaffirun West as he sells his snake oil, that he is a different breed of Salafi-Jihadi, a pragmatist, one who separates internal jihad from external jihad and he is only interested in internal jihad to liberate Syria, devoid of rhetoric, apocalyptic visions and a blood lust for the blood of the West. What is patently obvious in the conversation published by Crisis Group is his conviction that he can sell this snake oil to the West, which shows the contempt the Salafi-Jihadis have for the politicians of the West, given their complicity backed up by a string of quantum failures in their engagement with world Jihad. In the conversation al-Jolani presses all the buttons he hopes will raise Western ire against Assad and Russia, which he hopes enables him to place the thin edge of his wedge, a strategy resurrected from the Afghanistan playbook. Al-Jolani insists that HTS dominates the government that rules the liberated zones of Idlib province and he welcomes aid from the West and the operational presence of agencies from the West. The West is now welcomed to form working alliances with HTS in the liberated zone which indicates that al-Jolani and HTS is a new, unique form of Salafi-Jihadis, a form the West can do business with, an Afghanistan Mujaheddin 2.0, whilst al-Jolani goes through the menu of North Atlantic nations, what their specific interests and agendas be and promising what he perceives the West wants in Syria. What he must have, in a very limited window of opportunity, is a decisive North Atlantic intervention, to assure the survival of the liberated zone of Idlib province under his hegemony. He cannot count on Turkey and its Arab allies, which heightens the imperative to win North Atlantic intervention. But al-Jolani's strategy to win North Atlantic intervention, by any means necessary, makes it imperative to Assad and the Russians that Idlib is cleansed of the HTS, its allies and surrogates. In either scenario, the inherent masked nature of al-Jolani's, the HTS', its allies' and surrogates' agenda will soon be revealed and they are confident in their position that North Atlantic media will fail to report on their agenda revealed, as they are thoroughly immersed in the public campaign of Russia phobia/paranoia. The North Atlantic continues to make strategic decisions based on white supremacist discourse, viewing non-whites as low grade opponents, opening themselves to snake oil salesmen who are adept at lying to the kaffirun, to attain their ends by any means necessary. They have learnt nothing from their secret dealings with the Salafi-Jihadi as proxies in their wars against so-called common enemies, al-Jolani is earnestly praying that they take him into their bosom and intervene into Idlib to ensure his survival. With intervention by the kaffirun, this will be

proof for al-Jolani that his cause has the blessings of the Almighty and he is now obligated to complete the Salafi-Jihadi project. Without intervention, this is a message from the Almighty that his methodology was wrong and he now needs to return to the source, the principles of the apocalypse embraced by the Salafi-Jihadi, to learn from the lessons of Islamic State. Whatever the possible outcome, the gloves are off, and the return to the source is mandated, that is the nature of Salafi-Jihadi discourse, extremism for extremism sake.

The very operational history of al-Jolani as a Salafi-Jihadi who embraced active participation in Jihad against the munafique and the kaffirun makes him an object of mistrust, deception, a sell-out, worthy of attack. One who has the Fatwa of Takfir declared against him for pronouncing bay'ah (pledge of allegiance in Islam) to a series of Emirs and a Caliph, both in Iraq and Syria, to then renounce these leaders and make war on them, means that al-Jolani invites internecine war within the Salafi-Jihadi school of the Ummah. He is then a marked man, desperately in need of solace, immunity and protected space guaranteed by North Atlantic intervention in Idlib, without this protected space, he simply has too many enemies he can neutralize in Idlib and the Ummah. He has such a history of betrayal in contravention of Salafi-Jihadi principles, especially in his manifestation as the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, he forces enemies to form alliances of convenience to attain his elimination, as the Islamic State and the Assad regime. His hegemony over the liberated zones of Idlib province is then illusory, simply snake oil offered for sale to the West, as his persona invites internecine conflict within the Salafi-Jihadi movement, rather than a functional accord. These realities then indicate his propensity for extremism when the gloves are off and the continued investment of resources from the West in al-Jolani, indicates the recklessness of the West in dealing with Islamic extremism, framed by their arrogant, white supremacist discourse of threats posed by non-white races. The blow back is inevitable but politically useful in creating a sustainable, surveillance State captured by the financial oligarchy.