



Program on Extremism

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

THE ISLAMIC STATE'S EFFORT TO CO-OPT TANZIM HURRAS AD-DIN

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NOVEMBER 2019

About the Program on Extremism

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About the Author

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Abstract

Based on data gathered from eastern and northwestern Syria between January 2018 and April 2019, the author investigated the Islamic State's covert operation to infiltrate and fold *Tanzim Hurras ad-Din* (Guardians of Religion Organization), an unofficial *al-Qaeda* affiliate, under its banner. Evidenced by internal documents and interview materials, this paper argues that the Islamic State has orchestrated and implemented this multifaceted operation since at least mid-January 2017. In the run-up to territorial defeat in eastern Syria, the Islamic State signaled its interest in relocating its operatives to Idlib. The group also developed scenarios to facilitate the movement of its members to northwest Syria in the case of territorial defeat. With the potential of a reduction in counterterrorism efforts against the Islamic State, such a plan, if implemented successfully, may allow the organization to put a contingency plan into action, one that facilitates its effort to regroup and rebuild its depleted capacities in Syria. This paper utilizes and demonstrates the value of the tribe building method in gathering data in warzones.

Introduction

Making use of texts and audio-visual materials gathered from east and northwest Syria between January 3, 2018, and April 27, 2019, this article investigates the Islamic State's (IS) attempted/ongoing co-optation of *Tanzim Hurras ad-Din* (Guardians of Religion Organization, THD), an unofficial *al-Qaeda* (AQ) affiliate. Specifically, the author introduces the mechanism IS used in its operation to co-opt THD, including eliminating threats from diehard AQ loyalists, building institutional capacity, placing its agents in leading positions within the ranks of THD, and enforcing measures of organizational alignment between the two groups. In so doing, this effort presents a useful method for studying insurgent organizations' covert operations.

The paper identifies key details about the formation of THD and IS' operations to co-opt this unofficial AQ affiliate in the months leading up to IS' territorial collapse. The results show that IS had poured resources and manpower into THD for over a year before the

group announced its formation. According to internal IS documents obtained by the author, this operation started no later than mid-January 2017. Taken altogether, this effort demonstrates the invaluable insight gained from field research. This paper employs ‘*tribe building*,’ outlining a useful approach to better understand the operations of covert terrorist organizations.¹ In the following pages, the author provides the necessary background and guiding method. Through subsequent sections, the paper illustrates capacity building efforts and a multifaceted IS contingency plan to regroup and rebuild its organizational capabilities.

Background

The formation of THD in northwest Syria was announced on February 27, 2018.² The group itself did not claim an international agenda and so far has not been named as an official AQ affiliate.³ However, an assessment by the Dutch Intelligence and Security Service argued that THD has “open links to al-Qaeda and a specific focus on the international jihadist agenda.”⁴ While that analysis did not detail the sources and methods used in arriving at these conclusions, it is noteworthy that THD is led by AQ loyalists who opposed severing the ties between AQ and its former Syrian affiliate, *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS, a.k.a., *Jabhat Fateh al-Sham* and *Jabhat al-Nusra*).⁵ THD also places itself under AQ’s leadership and ideological outlook.⁶ Moreover, it is

¹ Malejacq, Romain, and Dipali Mukhopadhyay. “The ‘tribal politics’ of field research: A reflection on power and partiality in 21st-century warzones.” *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 4 (2016): 1011-1028.

² Thomas Joscelyn, “Jihadists form ‘Guardians of the Religion’ organization in Syria,” March 4, 2018, *FDD’s Long War Journal*, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/03/jihadists-form-guardians-of-the-religion-organization-in-syria.php>. While new materials suggest that THD was not named before January 2018, documents obtained by the author evidence that THD was named no later than mid-January 2017. To review this newly released materials, please see: Aymenn Al-Tamimi, “The Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (XII),” *Pundicity*, February 7, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/02/the-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-qaeda-dispute-primary-11>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), “The legacy of Syria - Global jihadism remains a threat to Europe,” *AIVD*, November 9, 2018, <https://english.aivd.nl/binaries/aivd-en/documents/publications/2018/11/09/the-legacy-of-syria-global-jihadism-remains-a-threat-to-europe/Syrias+legacy+definitieve+webversie.pdf>: P. 14.

⁵ Lister, Charles. “How Al-Qaida Lost Control of Its Syrian Affiliate: The Inside Story.” *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 2 (2018): P. 1-9; and Tore Refslund Hamming and Pieter Van Ostaeyen “The True Story of al-Qaeda’s Demise and Resurgence in Syria,” *Lawfare*, April 8, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/true-story-al-qaedas-demise-and-resurgence-syria>.

⁶ Hamming and Van Ostaeyen (2018).

argued that several THD leaders were involved with the Khorasan Group, a former AQ group charged with plotting foreign terrorist attacks from Syria.⁷ Other leaders of THD are thought to have been dispatched by Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of al-Qaeda, from Afghanistan, Iran, and Yemen.⁸ Additionally, the formation and emergence of THD is likely a response to the escalating schism between HTS and AQ.⁹ HTS's saga includes its two earlier divorces, first from IS, then the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria/Levant (ISIS/ISIL), and second from AQ. Its history, along with its ideological feud with THD, is documented in the works of the likes of Lister, Hamming, Al-Tamimi, and Joscelyn.¹⁰

The Syrian AQ veteran Samir Hijazi (a.k.a., Abu Hammam al-Suri) is the general leader of THD.¹¹ Abu Hammam and members of his *Shurah* (Consultative) Council are believed to have been central to the establishment of THD.¹² This Council is thought to

⁷ Lister (June 1, 2018).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ To review the context that led to the formation of HTD, see, for example: Lister (2018) and Hamming and Ostaeyen (2018).

¹⁰ Lister (2018); Tore Refslund Hamming and Pieter Van Ostaeyen, "The True Story of al-Qaeda's Demise and Resurgence in Syria," *Lawfare*, April 8, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/true-story-al-qaedas-demise-and-resurgence-syria>; Tore Hamming, "How Turkey and the election of Erdogan are fragmenting the Jihadi movement," *Jihadica*, July 6, 2018, <http://www.jihadica.com/how-turkey-and-the-election-of-erdogan-are-fragmenting-the-jihadi-movement/>; Thomas Joscelyn, "Jihadists form 'Guardians of the Religion' organization in Syria," *FDD's Long War Journal*, March 4, 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/03/jihadists-form-guardians-of-the-religion-organization-in-syria.php>; Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Jihadists in Syria react to Sochi agreement," *FDD's Long War Journal*, October 16, 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/10/analysis-jihadists-in-syria-react-to-sochi-agreement.php>; Thomas Joscelyn, "2 al Qaeda leaders reject proposed military council in Syria," *FDD's Long War Journal*, January 30, 2019, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/01/2-al-qaeda-leaders-reject-proposed-military-council-in-syria.php>; Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (VII)," *Pundicity*, January 30, 2019a, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/01/the-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-qaeda-dispute-primary-6>; Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (VIII)," *Pundicity*, February 3, 2019b, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/01/the-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-qaeda-dispute-primary-7>; Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (IX)," *Pundicity*, February 5, 2019c, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/01/the-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-qaeda-dispute-primary-8>; Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (X)," *Pundicity*, February 6, 2019d, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/01/the-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-qaeda-dispute-primary-9>; Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (XI)," *Pundicity*, February 6, 2019e, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/01/the-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-qaeda-dispute-primary-10>.

¹¹ Hamming and Van Ostaeyen (2018).

¹² Ibid.

be made of diehard AQ loyalists¹³ like, for example, Sami al-Uraydi (a.k.a., Abu Muhammad al-Shami), Bilal Khuraysat (a.k.a., Abu Khadija al-Urduni), and Khalid al-Aruri (a.k.a., Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni).¹⁴ Furthermore, THD is made up of a number of jihadi insurgent groups, including, in no particular order, the following factions: *Jaish al-Sahil*, *Saraia al-Sahil*, *Jaish al-Malahim*, *Jaish al-Badiya*, *Jund al-Shariah*, and *Saraia Kabul*.¹⁵ A study suggested that such mergers put the number of THD members between 2,000 and 3,000.¹⁶ However, this estimate should be scrutinized since the study did not detail its source(s) and method(s).¹⁷

Based on a source from the Iraqi security services, THD's expansion efforts included the Iraqi provinces of Salah al-Din, Diyala, Kirkuk, and Nineveh in Iraq.¹⁸ The source also alleged that THD aligned itself with *Jaysh Rijal at-Tariqa an-Naqshabandiya* (a.k.a. Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order), members of the jihadi current in Iraq, and "received the support of influential Iraqi political parties" in former IS strongholds.¹⁹ That report concludes by downplaying the potential of THD in Iraq. While the author could not ascertain the credibility of most of these claims, other sources seem to confirm THD's ambitions in Iraq. For example, two press articles reported, based on Iraqi military sources, that Iraqi Special Forces intercepted and killed dozens of THD and IS operatives while en route from Al-Bukamal, Deir ez-Zor in eastern Syria to the southern parts of Anbar province, Iraq.²⁰ These reports did not provide detail on why THD and IS

¹³ Charles Lister, "US Officials Just Mislabeled a Syrian Terror Group as al Qaeda. Worse, They're Missing a Far Bigger Threat," *Defense One*, June 1, 2018, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2018/06/us-officials-just-mislabeled-syrian-group-al-qaeda-worse-theyre-missing-far-bigger-threat/148656/>.

¹⁴ Hamming and Van Ostaeyen (2018).

¹⁵ Hamming and Van Ostaeyen (2018).

¹⁶ Hamming and Van Ostaeyen (2018).

¹⁷ It is noteworthy that another report, based on a single unnamed source, estimated that the HTD is made of about 2,000 members: Sultan Al Kanj, "Jihadist In-fighting and the Birth of Horas ad-Deen," *Chatham House*, April 2018, <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/jihadist-in-fighting-and-the-birth-of-horas-ad-deen>.

¹⁸ Hassan al-Saidi, "Is Iraq's 'Guardians of Religion' aiming for a 'Sunni region'?", *Al Arabiya English*, January 2, 2019, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2019/01/02/Iraq-Guardians-of-Religion-seeks-to-establish-a-Sunni-region.html>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Al Wafd, "Translation: The Prime Minister of Iraq Orders Sending Special Forces to Safeguard the Borders with Syria," *Al Wafd*, October 29, 2018, <https://alwafd.news/>

members operated alongside each other.²¹ Nevertheless, the two articles indicated that one of the captured terrorist's confessions led the Iraqi Special Forces to identify and confiscate arms from a warehouse that belonged to THD and IS.²² This author could not substantiate the credibility of these reports.

Soon after it announced its formation in northwest Syria, THD insurgent activities against the Syrian regime and its backers expanded to the coastal region of west and west-central Syria.²³ In late April 2018, in the 129th issue of *al-Naba*, IS' newsletter, the group declared *takfir* (excommunication) on THD.²⁴ Following this denouncement from IS and in light of increased assassination campaigns against THD members, using methods like car bombings and motorcycle assassinations, subsequent reports alleged that IS was covertly eliminating members of THD.²⁵ While the author does not have evidence that confirms IS involvement in these particular assassinations, the findings suggest that IS is a likely suspect.

Moreover, THD and *Ansar al-Tawhid* formed an alliance called *Hilf Nusrat al-Islam* (Alliance for the Support of Islam), on April 29, 2018.²⁶ The United Nations Security Council confirmed the two insurgent groups' merger.²⁷ *Ansar al-Tawhid* is suspected to be a formation of *Jund al-Aqsa*.²⁸ HTS alleged, based on its investigation, that *Jund al-Aqsa* is an IS front organization.²⁹ This front group is believed to have been formed by IS to eliminate HTS's foreign fighters and to deter future recruitment.³⁰

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Brian Perkins, "Syria: Al-Qaeda Looks to Revive its Fortunes," *Terrorism Monitor* 16, issue 16 (2018), <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/TM-Aug-10-2018-Issue-.pdf?x87069>.

²⁴ *Al-Naba*, issue (129), April 27, 2018.

²⁵ Hage Ali (2018).

²⁶ Maxwell Markusen, "Idlib Province and the Future of Instability in Syria," *CSIS Briefs*, September 21, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/idlib-province-and-future-instability-syria>.

²⁷ Security Council, "Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," *United Nations*, August 13, 2018, <https://undocs.org/en/S/2018/705>.

²⁸ Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda-linked operations room continues to attack Assad regime," *FDD's Long War Journal*, November 19, 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/11/al-qaeda-linked-operations-room-continues-to-attack-assad-regime.php>.

²⁹ The results of this HTS's internal investigation are available on <https://justpaste.it/y23n>.

³⁰ Lister (2018).

That said, under the umbrella of *Hilf Nusrat al-Islam* and overt support to AQ leadership and method, THD improved its once purportedly weak organizational assets, overall structure, and operational capacity.³¹ Interestingly, the reported improvement in THD's institutional capacity coincides with an IS covert operation to co-opt THD. Before presenting evidence on this covert operation and the profile of the IS operative at the heart of this multi-staged plan, it is prudent to provide detail on the guiding method.

Method

This effort employs data from a larger project to gather primary source materials on IS operations in Syria. In particular, it draws on audio-visual data and interview materials gathered by 11 professional data collectors between January 3, 2018 and April 27, 2019.³² This paper uses the method of tribe building to gain access to primary source materials outside of open source. Tribe building reflects research settings in which investigators become part of interconnected local networks of individuals and groups that are equipped with the skills and aptitude to gain access, deal with risk, and share data in hard to reach localities such as warzones.³³

Over the course of three years, the author built these '*trust networks*'³⁴ and trained individuals within these networks with varying methods of sampling and targeted data collection. Trust is critical and a necessary prerequisite to engaging in such data gathering efforts, "as informants are more likely to share information with those they have come to know and trust."³⁵ The author took an incremental approach to tribe building and did so through establishing, running, exiting, and returning to networks of informants. For instance, this paper relies on data from three networks of informants.

³¹ Joscelyn (March 4, 2018, August 13, 2018, and January 30, 2018); Hamming and Ostaeen (2018); and Hamming (2018).

³² The data collectors were trained by and have worked with the author on a number of projects in the past. They were tasked by their organizations to collect data on IS operations in Syria during the collection period.

³³ Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay (2016).

³⁴ Tilly, Charles. *Trust and Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

³⁵ Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay (2016): P.1017.

The author entered the first network in January 2018. The author exited this network of six informants in September 2018. The five other informants were part of two networks that were entered in August 2018 and exited gradually by April 2019.

The data collectors or informants gave their consent to participate in the study on the conditions of rigorous internal and external confidentiality measures. The data collectors are engaged in gathering information on insurgent groups on behalf of their employers. They stressed that data gathering for their employers is their priority and that they only share data outside of the scope of collection for their employers. The data that emerged from the field were translated, catalogued, and cross-checked against propaganda materials and documentary evidence during the same time period. The data were anonymised, date tagged, and stored in terms of individual data entries. Each data collector was given an alphanumeric code (DC01 through DC011).

Efforts were made to remedy tribe building's associated caveats and optimize the validity and reliability of the data while maintaining its integrity. Notwithstanding that tribe building gives unique '*ground truth*,' the method necessitates considering the asymmetric distribution of power between the researcher and informants as well as issues of impartiality.³⁶ In the process of collaborative sense-making in warzones,³⁷ informants are more powerful than the investigator and the relationship between the two parties is best described as symbiotic in which each party has the power to alter the scope of data gathering.³⁸ It is noteworthy, however, that informants hold the ultimate power in shaping and limiting the scope of data collection. In this dyad,³⁹ the flow of information is subjected to the symbiotic back-and-forth wherein informants have a higher degree of autonomy. Impartiality is almost impossible in the context of studying

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Haar, Gemma Van Der, Annelies Heijmans, and Dorothea Hilhorst. 2013. "Interactive Research and the Construction of Knowledge in Conflict-Affected Settings." *Disasters* 37, (1): 20–35.

³⁸ Cassell, Joan. 1980. "Ethical Principles for Conducting Fieldwork." *American Anthropologist* 82, (1): 28–41; and Adams, Laura L. 1999. "The Mascot Researcher." *Journal of Composite Materials* 33, (10): 928–40.

³⁹ Diphorn, Tessa. 2012. "The Emotionality of Participation: Various Modes of Participation in Ethnographic Fieldwork on Private Policing in Durban, South Africa." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 42, (2): 201–25.

terrorist organizations in warzones.⁴⁰ Neither the investigator nor the informants are impartial to the observed subjects of the study. For one, working with informants who are affiliated with or sympathetic to the Islamic State is impractical, dangerous, and illegal. This is a limitation that field researchers must reckon with when studying terrorist organizations.

In the effort to maximize confidentiality, a set of information about the informants and their subject(s) is kept private.⁴¹ To this effect, all details that increase the odds of the informants being identified by other informants and their subjects were removed (i.e., internal confidentiality).⁴² Examples of these details include names, titles, aliases, and quotes from active and deceased members of the Islamic State. While snowball sampling can increase social infiltration of studied subjects,⁴³ the data collectors were instructed to abstain from using the method as it may compromise internal confidentiality. Moreover, idiosyncratic details, including but not limited to, the locations and ethnic, cultural, and professional backgrounds of the informants were removed to preserve external confidentiality and eliminate the odds of deductive disclosure.⁴⁴ It is noteworthy that to facilitate the review process, the data collectors agreed to share the raw data with the review team.

Furthermore, a number of measures were employed to improve the validity of the data and findings, including triangulation, contradictory evidence, constant comparison, and respondent validation.⁴⁵ By means of triangulation, the author combined different methods and data (i.e., documentary evidence collected in-theater and open source

⁴⁰ Fine, Gary Alan. 1993. "Ten Lies of Ethnography: Moral Dilemmas of Field Research." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 22, (3): 267–94.

⁴¹ Benjamin Saunders, Jenny Kitzinger, and Celia Kitzinger, "Anonymising interview data: Challenges and compromise in practice," *Qualitative Research* 15, 5 (2015): pp. 616-632.

⁴² Martin Tolich, "Internal Confidentiality: When Confidentiality Assurances Fail Relational Informants," *Qualitative Sociology* 27, 1 (2004): pp. 101-106.

⁴³ Peritore, N. Patrick. 1990. "Reflections on Dangerous Fieldwork," *The American Sociologist* 21, (4): 359–72.

⁴⁴ Alexander Tsai, Brandon Kohrt, Lynn Matthews, Theresa Betancourt, Jooyoung Lee, Andrew Papachristos, Sheri Weiser, and Shari Dworkin, "Promises and pitfalls of data sharing in qualitative research," *Social Science & Medicine* 169 (2016): pp. 191-198.

⁴⁵ Anderson, Claire. "Presenting and evaluating qualitative research." *American journal of pharmaceutical education* 74, no. 8 (2010): 141.

materials). Contradictory evidence or deviant cases, as long as they were accurate and objective, were sought out, retained in the data entries, and used in the interpretation of the findings. The data was not fragmented but rather viewed as one piece. The constant comparison of data entries allowed the author to identify unanticipated and emerging themes (e.g., elements of IS' plan to co-opt THD).

In order to minimize bias in the data, reduce the risk of exposing the informants, and maintain trust with them, they were not informed on the findings of other participants during the data collection phase. However, the data collectors were briefed on the data, analysis, and findings of an earlier draft of this paper to allow them to provide their feedback and, ultimately, improve respondent validity. The data collectors approved the used quotes and interpretation of the results.

Last but not least, this endeavor adheres to '*localized ethics*,' that is to say, an approach in which the investigator and informants share risk and responsibility.⁴⁶ This approach acknowledges that the informants are best situated to determine the visibility and risk associated with data collection efforts.⁴⁷ Therefore, this paper recognizes informants' assessment of the visibility and risk of data collection as the bases to limit the scope of data gathering. In other words, the author did not pursue data gathering on relevant issues when such efforts were deemed risky by the informants. The following pages provide detail on the leading operative behind IS' attempts to co-opt THD and subsequently discuss how these efforts can be seen as elements of a contingency plan to regroup and rebuild its organizational capabilities.

⁴⁶ Kovats-Bernat, J. Christopher. 2002. "Negotiating Dangerous Fields: Pragmatic Strategies for Fieldwork

Mid Violence and Terror," *American Anthropologist* 104, (1): 208–22.

⁴⁷ Wood, Elisabeth Jean. 2006. "The Ethical Challenges of Field Research in Conflict Zones." *Qualitative Sociology* 29, (3): 373–86.

The First Wali of Raqqa

Taha Subhi Falaha (a.k.a., Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani), IS’ former spokesperson, is suspected to have been tasked with the group’s external intelligence operations.⁴⁸ Such operations are managed by IS’ Directorate of General Security.⁴⁹ However, even before al-‘Adnani’s death in 2016, a Syrian national by the name of Ali Musa al-Shawakh (a.k.a., Ali Juma al-Shawakh, Abu Luqman, Abu Ayoub al-Ansari/al-Suri, and Abu Adam) is reported to have been tasked with external operations as the *amir* of the Directorate of General Security.⁵⁰ Moreover, there is evidence that al-Shawakh reconfigured the hierarchal design of the original *amni* forces’ (Directorate of General Security) organizational structure sometime in mid-2016.⁵¹ This organizational reconfiguration gave al-Shawakh’s directorate enough power to dominate a wide array of IS’ operations, including heavy oversight over IS’ Central Media Directorate.⁵²

Born in 1973 in Sahl village in Raqqa province, Syria, al-Shawakh would rise to prominence in the ranks of the IS organization.⁵³ He is a former student of Aleppo University’s law department.⁵⁴ Among other things, al-Shawakh is suspected to have

⁴⁸ Rukmini Callimachi, “How a secretive branch of ISIS built a global network of killers,” *New York Times*, 3 August 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/04/world/middleeast/isis-german-recruit-interview.html?_r=0.

⁴⁹ Asaad Almohammad and Charlie Winter, “From Directorate of Intelligence to Directorate of Everything: The Islamic State’s Emergent Amni-Media Nexus,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 1 (2019).

⁵⁰ Security Council, “Security Council ISIL (Da’esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Adds 12 Names to Its Sanctions List,” Security Council: SC/12266, 29 February 2016, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12266.doc.htm>; U.S. Department of the Treasury. “Treasury Sanctions Major Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant Leaders, Financial Figures, Facilitators, and Supporters,” *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, September 29, 2015. <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0188.aspx>; and U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Counter Terrorism Designations,” *Office of Foreign Assets Control*, September 29, 2015, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20150929.aspx>.

⁵¹ Author interview with DC05, October 3, 2018; Author interview with DC06, October 19, 2018; Author interview with DC04, December 1, 2018; and Almohammad and Winter (2019).

⁵² Ibid; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The Archivist: The Islamic State’s Security Apparatus Structure in the Provinces,” *Jihadology*, 2 August 2017, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/20129/the-archivist-the-islamic-state-security>.

⁵³ U.S. Department of the Treasury (2015); and Security Council (2016).

⁵⁴ Andrew J. Tabler, “Eyeing Raqqa: A Tale of Four Tribes,” *Washington Institute: Policy Notes*, March 2017, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyNote39-Raqqa.pdf>; and Eric Schmitt, Rukmini Callimachi and Anne Barnard, “Spokesman’s Death Will Have Islamic State Turning to Its ‘Deep Bench,’” *The New York Times*, August 31, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/01/world/middleeast/syria-isis-adnani.html>.

been involved with a late Syrian facilitator of jihadi travelers between Syria and Iraq in the early days of the Iraq war.⁵⁵ This deceased facilitator, Mahmoud Qul Aghassi (a.k.a., Abu al-Qaqaa), was believed to be an ally of the Syrian regime's security forces.⁵⁶ That said, a number of accounts suggest that al-Shawakh spent time in Saidnaya Prison, an infamous Syrian military detention facility where Islamist prisoners were trained and sent to join insurgent groups fighting American forces in Iraq after the fall of Saddam's government.⁵⁷ However, the duration of al-Shawakh's captivity and whether he traveled to Iraq between 2003 and 2010 remain unclear.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, there seems to be an agreement that, like other key Syrian Islamist and jihadi leading figures, al-Shawakh was released from Saidnaya Prison by the Syrian regime during the early months of the Syrian crisis in 2011.⁵⁹ Sometime after his release, he joined Jabhat al-Nusra, and, at some point, became the second-in-command in Raqqa, subordinate only to Abu Saad al-Hadrami. In January 2014, al-Shawakh either carried out a planned plot to coerce Jabhat al-Nusra's operatives in Raqqa to join the ranks of IS, then ISIS, or displayed his allegiances to Ibrahim al-Badri (a.k.a., Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi), the leader of IS and its two former iterations, by killing his Jabhat al-Nusra superior, al-Hadrami.⁶⁰ By all accounts, al-Shawakh became IS's first *wali* (ruler) of its former de facto capital.⁶¹ He was assigned to this significant role after being

⁵⁵ Tabler (2017).

⁵⁶ For more details on Abu al-Qaqaa, please see: Fishman, Brian, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); Joby Warrick, *Black flags: The rise of ISIS* (New York: Anchor, 2015); and Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror - updated edition* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016).

⁵⁷ WikiLeaks, "Public Library of US Diplomacy," *WikiLeaks*, accessed on January 31, 2019, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08DAMASCUS482_a.html; and WikiLeaks, "Public Library of US Diplomacy," *WikiLeaks*, accessed on January 31, 2019, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10DAMASCUS158_a.html.

⁵⁸ Tabler (2017); and Almohammad and Speckhard (2017).

⁵⁹ *Ibid*; and Joshua Landis, "Syria's Top Five Insurgent Leaders," *Syria Comment*, October 1, 2013, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/biggest-powerful-militia-leaders-syria/>.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*.

⁶¹ *Ibid*; Schmitt et al. (2016); Jamie Dettmer, "Has ISIS Lost Its Head? Power Struggle Erupts with Al-Baghdadi Seriously Wounded," *The Daily Beast*, October 10, 2015, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/has-isis-lost-its-head-power-struggle-erupts-with-al-baghdadi-seriously-wounded>; Roula Khalaf, "End of the Isis old guard signals more danger ahead," *Financial Times*, September 7, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/1c781a38-743f-11e6-b60a-de4532d5ea35>; and Jacqueline R. Sutherland, "How Is ISIS Able to Commit Acts of Terror as It Loses Territory?" *The National Interest*, November 8, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-isis-able-commit-acts-terror-it-loses-territory-23111>.

charged with leading IS' Syria branch of the Directorate of General Security. That position allowed al-Shawakh to oversee “combat assignments for foreign fighters,” “ISIL’s detention of foreign hostages,” “the appointment of other ISIL leaders,” and “security matters, including executions, interrogations, and transfers of... prisoners.”⁶² Additionally, as of mid-2014, he was a member of “a governance council chaired by” al-Baghdadi.⁶³

A report following the elimination of al-‘Adnani from the battlefield, based on the accounts of IS deserters, argued that al-Shawakh and al-‘Adnani did not see eye to eye regarding war conduct in Syria and that due to their frequent quarrels al-Baghdadi transferred al-Shawakh to Iraq.⁶⁴ However, it seems that al-Baghdadi tried to resolve the reported tension between two of his top lieutenants.⁶⁵ It appears that al-Shawakh was transferred to Iraq⁶⁶ but not before outmaneuvering al-‘Adnani by limiting his power before the latter was finally killed.⁶⁷ Around that time, al-Shawakh was predicted to become the next IS spokesperson.⁶⁸ He did not. After the reported death of U.S. Master Sgt. Jonathan J. Dunbar and U.K. soldier Sgt. Matt Tonroe, while on a classified joint mission to ‘kill or capture a known ISIS member,’⁶⁹ some questioned whether al-Shawakh was the target.⁷⁰ It is unclear whether he was. A year before silencing the infamous mouthpiece of IS (al-‘Adnani), al-Shawakh was viewed as a possible *Wali al-‘Ahd* (successor) of al-Baghdadi.⁷¹ IS did not, at least publicly, name any successor to al-Baghdadi. Media reports, based on Iraqi intelligence sources, claimed that he had been

⁶² U.S. Department of The Treasury (2015).

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Zvi Bar’el, “With ISIS on the Run, Is the Dream of an Islamic State Officially Dead?,” *Haaretz*, September 2, 2016, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/isis/with-isis-on-the-run-is-the-dream-of-an-islamic-state-officially-dead-1.5434516>.

⁶⁵ Author interview with DC05, October 3, 2018.

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Almohammad and Winter (2019).

⁶⁸ Schmitt et al. (2016); and Khalaf (2016).

⁶⁹ Barbara Starr, “US and British soldiers killed in Syria were on ISIS ‘kill or capture’ mission,” *CNN*, April 2, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/04/02/politics/us-british-soldiers-killed-syria-isis-kill-mission/index.html>.

⁷⁰ RT, “SAS soldier died in Syria trying to ‘kill or capture’ ISIS member,” RT, April 4, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/uk/423147-sas-soldier-syria-isis/>.

⁷¹ Dettmer (2015).

eliminated a number of times.⁷² The latest of these unconfirmed killings was on April 23, 2018.⁷³ Interview materials, suggest that he was not killed.⁷⁴

Described as “one of al-Baghdadi’s trusted confidants,” al-Shawakh’s portfolio is extensive.⁷⁵ As suggested, he was transferred to Iraq before the elimination of al-‘Adnani;⁷⁶ it seems that he led an operation to exfiltrate senior IS operatives from Iraq and handled key security functions in anticipation of the loss of IS territories in Iraq.⁷⁷ Traveling with a small number of security operatives, al-Shawakh appears to have been able to make it there and back from Iraq before Mosul’s liberation.⁷⁸ Constantly on the move between north, central, and west Syria, among a few of al-Baghdadi’s top lieutenants,⁷⁹ he was charged with restructuring the IS organization sometime between the liberations of Mosul and Raqqa.⁸⁰ This was possibly to reconfigure its institutional bureaucracy into a form of organizational adhocacy,⁸¹ one that would facilitate the

⁷² Mohammed Ebraheem, “Iraqi warplanes kill Islamic State’s second-in-command in Syria,” Iraqi News, April 23, 2018, <https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/iraqi-warplanes-kill-islamic-states-second-in-command-in-syria/>. The following reports indicate that he changed his name and operational aliases after one of the media reported his death: Security Council (2016); and U.S. Department of the Treasury (2015).

⁷³ Ebraheem (2018).

⁷⁴ Author interview with DC04, January 2, 2019; Author interview with DC09, January 25, 2019; and Author interview with DC08, February 2018.

⁷⁵ Author interview with DC05, October 3, 2018; Author interview with DC03, October 5, 2018; Author interview with DC06, October 19, 2018; Author interview with DC04, December 1, 2018; Author interview with DC02, December 4, 2018; Author interview with DC08, December 9, 2018; and Author interview with DC010, January 10, 2019.

⁷⁶ For example, see: Bar’el (2016).

⁷⁷ Author interview with DC05, October 3, 2018.

⁷⁸ Ibid; and Author interview with DC02, December 4, 2018.

⁷⁹ Author interview with DC05, October 3, 2018.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Author interview with DC01, January 3, 2018; Author interview with DC02, January 12, 2018; Author interview with DC06, January 18, 2018; Author interview with DC04, April 1, 2018; Author interview with DC02, April 14, 2018; Author interview with DC05, April 18, 2018; Author interview with DC02 and DC03, April 25, 2018; Author interview with DC03, May 4, 2018; Author interview with DC04, May 14, 2018; Author Interview with DC02, May 16, 2018; Author interviews with DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 19, 2018; Author interview with DC06, May 20, 2018; Author interviews with DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 25, 2018; Author interview with DC03, May 30, 2018; Author Interview with DC06, July 16, 2018; Author interview with DC01, July 20, 2018; Author interview with DC01, July 28, 2018; Author interview with DC03, August 5, 2018; Author interview with DC02, August 17, 2018; Author Interview with DC04, August 19, 2018; Author interview with DC03, September 5, 2018; Author interview with DC02, September 6, 2018; Author interview with DC04, September 7, 2018; Author interview with DC01, December 9, 2018; Author interview with DC06, September 15, 2018; Author interview with DC01, September 25, 2018; Author interview with DC05, October 3, 2018; Author interview with DC04, October 8, 2018; Author interview with DC02, October 16, 2018; Author interview with DC06, October 19, 2018;

transition to a covert insurgency and improve the use of guerrilla warfare methods.⁸²

Around that time, al-Shawakh assigned a new director to oversee security-related matters in *Wilayat al-Khair* (IS-held territories in Der ez-Zor: this branch is known as Security Post/Point 13) before finally managing to oust that region's ruler, replacing him with one of his subordinates and loyalists.⁸³ Topping all of this off, al-Shawakh, under al-Baghdadi's directives, handpicked three 'judges' to oversee *al-Lajnah al-Mufuthah* (the Delegated Committee) and a certain Monitoring Committee, placing him at the heart of ideological schism within the ranks of IS.⁸⁴ With this brief examination of al-Shawakh's profile, the following section details, among other things, his key role in the operation to infiltrate and co-opt THD.

A Contingency Plan

In short, between early June and late July 2016, HTS, then Jabhat al-Nusra, initiated a process to untie itself from AQ and to rebrand itself into Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.⁸⁵ In late January 2017, this former Syrian AQ affiliate announced a merger with several Syrian

Author interview with DC04, October 20, 2018; Author interview with DC01, October 23, 2018: interview material and PHOTO-2018-10-23; Author interview with DC02, October 29, 2018; Author interview with DC04, November 5, 2018; Author interview with DC05, November 8, 2018; Author interview with DC04, December 1, 2018; and Author interview with DC02, December 4, 2018.

⁸² Almohammad and Winter (2019).

⁸³ Author interview with DC05, October 3, 2018; and Author interview with DC02, December 4, 2018.

⁸⁴ Author interview with DC010, January 10, 2019. Author interview with DC04, September 6, 2018: audio-6-Sep-18-1, audio-6-Sep-18-2, audio-6-Sep-18-3, and audio-6-Sep-18-4. The recordings feature a speech by a former emir in the directorate of Mosques and Proselytization. He was detained immediately after the speech. It is a clear dissent against IS practices and committed injustices. The audios are evidence of schism inside IS ranks regarding method and creed. The speaker argued against killing those who pronounced Shahadah and denounced those who kill individuals who utter the statement. For details on this ideological schism, please see: Cole Bunzel, "A House Divided: Origins and Persistence of the Islamic State's Ideological Divide," *Jihadica*, June 5, 2018. <http://www.jihadica.com/a-house-divided/>; Cole Bunzel, "Caliphate in Disarray: Theological Turmoil in the Islamic State," *Jihadica*, October 3, 2017. <http://www.jihadica.com/caliphate-in-disarray/>; Cole Bunzel, "The Islamic State's Mufti on Trial: The Saga of the 'Silsila 'Ilmiyya,'" *CTC Sentinel 11*, no. 9 (2018): P. 14-17; Aymenn Al-Tamim, "Dissent in the Islamic State: The News Postings of Mu'assasat al-Turath al-'Ilmi," *Pundicity*, September 21, 2018, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/21636/dissent-in-the-islamic-state-the-news-postings>; Aymenn Al-Tamim, "Internal Conflicts in the Islamic State's Media Department: A Letter of Complaint," *Pundicity*, December 21, 2018, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/21906/internal-conflicts-in-the-islamic-state-media>; and Aymenn Al-Tamim, "Dissent in the Islamic State: The Testimony of Abu Abd al-Malek al-Shami," *Pundicity*, January 14, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/22240/dissent-in-the-islamic-state-the-testimony-of-abu>.

⁸⁵ Lister (2018); and Hamming and Van Ostaeyen (2018).

Islamist groups, rebranding itself again and this time as HTS.⁸⁶ In so doing, HTS broke away from AQ and displayed a ‘friendlier’ attitude towards Turkey’s foreign policy and its ruler.⁸⁷ This strategic shift, from the time of initiating the breakup with AQ, has antagonized and still agitates AQ’s ideologues and loyalists in Syria and beyond.⁸⁸ This is the context, albeit very brief and incomprehensive,⁸⁹ that led to the announcement of THD’s formation in February 2018, a process that was initiated no later than mid-January 2017.⁹⁰ And IS was involved in the process of establishing THD from the very beginning.⁹¹

Operating through the Unified Security Center, al-Shawakh’s brainchild,⁹² and in collaboration with an institution known as *Diwan al-Khilafa* (Caliphate Directorate),⁹³ al-Shawakh orchestrated the operation to co-opt THD.⁹⁴ Quick to capitalize on the intention of AQ loyalists to split from the previous iteration of HTS and form a new

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Hamming (July 6, 2018); and Joscelyn (2019).

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ For a detailed review of this process and context, please see: Lister (2018); and Hamming and Van Ostaeyen (2018); Aymenn Al-Tamimi, “The Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (VI),” *Pundicity*, December 15, 2017, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2017/12/the-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-qaeda-dispute-primary-5>; and Al-Tamimi (2019a-e).

⁹⁰ Author interview with DC08, January 30, 2019; **PHOTO-2019-01-30-1**. The picture displays a receipt of USD 15,000. The fund was requested on January 29, 2017 and approved on July 12, 2017. The money is released to pay for services to establish Hurras ad-Din. Author interview with DC08, February 3, 2019; interview material and **PHOTO-2019-02-03-1**. The picture displays a receipt of USD 7,000. The fund was requested and approved on January 17, 2017. This fund was released to purchase cameras and media equipment for Hurras ad-Din. Both receipts are requested and approved by amni operatives. The recipients are members of Hurras ad-Din amni apparatus. Author interview with DC03, February 4, 2019; and Author interview with DC05, February 6, 2019.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Author interview with DC02, December 4, 2018; Author interview with DC05, December 5, 2018; and Almohammad and Winter (2019a; 2019b).

⁹³ Author interview with DC06, October 19, 2018; Author interview with DC04, October 20, 2018; and Author interview with DC02, October 29, 2018; Author interview with DC09, February 17, 2019; **PHOTO-2019-02-13-3**. The picture depicts an undated intelligence research assignment for an Islamic State operative in the United Kingdom. This file shows that the entity entrusted with archiving such documents is Diwan al-Khilafah. This entity is made up of the deputies, advisers, and support staff of al-Baghdadi. Diwan al-Khilafah keeps record of ongoing terrorist operation outside IS held territories and has the final say regarding such operations. These operations are planned and implemented by the Directorate of General Security under the oversight of Diwan al-Khilafah.

⁹⁴ Author interview with DC03, October 5, 2018; Author interview with DC02, December 4, 2018; Author interview with DC05, December 5, 2018; Author interview with DC06, December 6, 2018; Author interview with DC04, January 2, 2019; Author interview with DC011, January 14, 2019; Author interview with DC011, January 28, 2019; Author interview with DC09, February 1, 2019; Author interview with DC08, February 3, 2019; Author interview with DC03, February 4, 2019; Author interview with DC05, February 6, 2019; and Author interview with DC010, February 6, 2019.

jihadi group, sometime before mid-January 2017 al-Shawakh commissioned the leader of his organization's sleeper cells in HTS, a certain Muhammad 'Adnan al-Abuathi, with establishing a sufficient security, media, and administrative infrastructure for THD.⁹⁵ Under IS directives, these institutions were to be led by IS operatives and/or AQ loyalists who were willing to offer *Bay'a* (pledge of allegiance) to IS' leader, albeit secretly.⁹⁶ This tactic was employed throughout the establishment phase and remained enforced after the announcement of THD's formation.⁹⁷

As IS realized the inevitability of territorial defeat, Al-Shawakh transferred his top lieutenant, a certain Muhammad Abdul Karim al-Thahir (a.k.a., Abu Musab), to expedite the operation to co-opt members of THD months before the group announced its formation.⁹⁸ Al-Thahir was charged with overseeing an IS special security unit that worked on securing the pledge of allegiances to al-Baghdadi from AQ loyalists who had participated in the establishment of THD.⁹⁹ He was the leading figure of the department of external operations of IS' security apparatus as of early February 2019.¹⁰⁰ According to the description of the duties and responsibilities of this department,¹⁰¹ al-Thahir

⁹⁵ Author interview with DC09, January 1, 2019; and Author interview with DC03, February 4, 2018. Al-Abuathi alerted his superior, al-Shawakh, of AQ loyalist intention to form a new faction in early January 2017. Author interview with DC08, January 30, 2019: **PHOTO-2019-01-30-1**; Author interview with DC08, February 3, 2019: **PHOTO-2019-02-03-1**, **PHOTO-2019-02-03-2**, and interview materials; Author interview with DC08, February 12, 2019: **PHOTO-2019-02-10-1** and **PHOTO-2019-02-10-2**; Author interview with DC09, February 17, 2019: **PHOTO-2019-02-13-1**, **PHOTO-2019-02-13-2**, and **PHOTO-2019-02-13-3**. These receipts outline the funds IS poured into THD to establish a strong security and media apparatus. In addition, the documents indicate that IS funded the movement of a number of its operatives to safe houses in THD's sphere of operations. Based on these documents, IS spent no less than 67,000 USD on these activities. It is likely that the number accedes the stated figure.

⁹⁶ Ibid; Author interview with DC02, February 5, 2019; and Author interview with DC05, February 6, 2019.

⁹⁷ Ibid; Author interview with DC03, October 5, 2018; Author interview with DC02, December 4, 2018; Author interview with DC05, December 5, 2018; Author interview with DC02, January 21, 2018; and Author interview with DC010, February 6, 2019.

⁹⁸ Author interview with DC02, December 4, 2018; and Author interview with DC05, December 5, 2018.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Author interview with DC09, February 1, 2019; Author interview with DC08, February 3, 2018; and Author interview with DC010, February 6, 2019.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

might have been involved in an IS security operation that led to the killing of more than sixteen people, including four Americans, in Manbij, Syria.¹⁰²

Al-Shawakh's directives to al-Thahir before the announcement of the formation of THD were clear:¹⁰³ Flip AQ loyalists, and if you cannot flip them, kill them.¹⁰⁴ As well as this, al-Thahir was charged with overseeing the recruitment of locals from greater Idlib.¹⁰⁵ It appears that he had overachieved regarding these missions,¹⁰⁶ managing to "recruit a number of operatives who were able to climb Hurras al-Din's hierarchy."¹⁰⁷ In brief, this element of the operation focused on eliminating any threat, recruiting key AQ loyalists, and providing support and directives to new recruiters.¹⁰⁸

Right from the start in mid-January 2017, IS invested in structuring and building THD's organizational capacity.¹⁰⁹ Central to this effort was establishing both a strong security apparatus and a strong media office to be led by, managed by, and made up of IS loyalists.¹¹⁰ At the time, IS worked on establishing THD,¹¹¹ with a general goal to co-opt it at a certain point. This undertaking aimed to guarantee an expedited process for "the establishment of a sufficient infrastructure to tackle real estate [matters], financial

¹⁰² Rukmini Callimachi, "Described as Defeated, Islamic State Punches Back With Guerrilla Tactics," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/21/world/middleeast/isis-syria-attack-iraq.html>; and Author interview with DC09, February 17, 2019: **PHOTO-2019-02-13-3**.

¹⁰³ Author interview with DC010, February 6, 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Author interview with DC02, December 4, 2018; and Author interview with DC05, December 5, 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Author interview with DC03, October 5, 2018.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid; Author interview with DC02, December 4, 2018; Author interview with DC05, December 5, 2018; Author interview with DC09, February 1, 2019; Author interview with DC08, February 3, 2019; and Author interview with DC010, February 6, 2019.

¹⁰⁷ Author interview with DC05, December 5, 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Author interview with DC03, October 5, 2018; and Author interview with DC02, December 4, 2018.

¹⁰⁹ Author interview with DC08, January 30, 2019: **PHOTO-2019-01-30-1**; Author interview with DC08, February 3, 2019: **PHOTO-2019-02-03-1**, **PHOTO-2019-02-03-2**, and interview materials; Author interview with DC08, February 12, 2019: **PHOTO-2019-02-10-1** and **PHOTO-2019-02-10-2**; Author interview with DC09, February 17, 2019: **PHOTO-2019-02-13-1**, **PHOTO-2019-02-13-2**, and **PHOTO-2019-02-13-3**. For example, **PHOTO-2019-01-30-1** displays a receipt of USD 15,000; requested by an IS emni operative (embedded in THD) and approved by the amni operative in charge of the financial affairs of the operation to co-opt HTS (this operative was based in eastern Syria). This fund was requested on January 29, 2017 and released on July 12, 2017. Interview materials: Author interview with DC03, February 4, 2019; and Author interview with DC05, February 6, 2019.

¹¹⁰ Ibid; Author interview with DC02, December 4, 2018; Author interview with DC05, December 5, 2018; Author interview with DC02, January 21, 2019; Author interview with DC08, February 3, 2019; and Author interview with DC02, February 5, 2018.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

affairs,” and the recruitment of trained “administrative personnel” to run educational institutions, oversee sharia affairs, and manage detention facilities.¹¹² As well as the aforementioned operations, IS relocated essential security and media personnel to improve THD’s capacity and train its cadres.¹¹³ These IS-orchestrated capacity-building efforts, recruitments, and assassinations did not stop with the announcement of THD’s formation.¹¹⁴ Throughout the establishment and formation of THD, IS used its agents and resources to configure THD’s organizational structure in a manner that facilitates merging the two groups’ assets and aligns their modes of operation.¹¹⁵ It is unclear now whether IS succeeded or is still running the operation to co-opt THD. This author could not find evidence to examine the depth, or lack thereof, of IS co-optation of THD’s Consultative Council, the organization’s most senior leaders.¹¹⁶

Sometime before August 2018, from the northern vicinity of the town of Abu Al-Khater, Deir ez-Zor, IS used an office by the name *al-Maktab al-Amni la-Ansar al-Jihad* (the security office for the supporters of jihad),¹¹⁷ a subordinate office of the IS’ Unified Security Center,¹¹⁸ to collaborate with members of THD.¹¹⁹ This office is likely behind the joint IS and THD operation intercepted on the borders between Syria and Iraq

¹¹² Author interview with DC05, February 6, 2019.

¹¹³ Author interview with DC08, January 30, 2019: **PHOTO-2019-01-30-1**; Author interview with DC08, February 3, 2019: **PHOTO-2019-02-03-1**, **PHOTO-2019-02-03-2**, and interview materials; Author interview with DC08, February 12, 2019: **PHOTO-2019-02-10-1** and **PHOTO-2019-02-10-2**; Author interview with DC09, February 17, 2019: **PHOTO-2019-02-13-1**, **PHOTO-2019-02-13-2**, and **PHOTO-2019-02-13-3**.

¹¹⁴ Ibid; Author interview with DC03, October 5, 2018; Author interview with DC02, December 4, 2018; Author interview with DC05, December 5, 2018; Author interview with DC06, December 6, 2018; Author interview with DC04, January 4, 2019; Author interview with DC02, January 21, 2019; Author interview with DC09, February 1, 2019; and Author interview with DC05, February 6, 2019.

¹¹⁵ Author interview with DC03, October 5, 2018; Author interview with DC02, December 4, 2018; Author interview with DC05, December 5, 2018; Author interview with DC06, December 6, 2018; Author interview with DC04, January 4, 2019; Author interview with DC02, January 21, 2019; Author interview with DC09, February 1, 2019; Author interview with DC08, February 3, 2019: interview material, PHOTO-2019-01-30-1, and PHOTO-2019-02-03-2; and Author interview with DC05, February 6, 2019; Author interview with DC010, February 6, 2019.

¹¹⁶ Author interview with DC06, December 6, 2018.

¹¹⁷ Author interview with DC04, January 2, 2019; and Author interview with DC09, February 1, 2019. Ansar al-Sharia is also one of the factions that were formed into THD.

¹¹⁸ For more details on the IS Unified Security Center, please see: Almohammad and Winter (2019).

¹¹⁹ Author interview with DC04, January 2, 2019; and Author interview with DC09, February 1, 2019.

around that time.¹²⁰ According to the author’s research, if confirmed, this marks the first detected joint operation/collaboration between members of IS and THD.

In the weeks running up to its territorial collapse, IS negotiated for “safe passage to the Syrian province of Idlib”¹²¹ with the Syrian Democratic Forces through an IS division by the name *Point/Post 11*.¹²² Post 11 overlaps with the central command and control and administrative authority of IS security forces.¹²³ Then, IS asked for safe passage to Idlib, the operational sphere of THD. It appears that by early February 2019, IS had already enforced certain measures of organizational alignment between itself and THD¹²⁴ and invested in establishing a new faction to facilitate a potential merger.¹²⁵ According to the journalist Rukmini Callimachi, the deal to grant IS safe passage to Idlib was “on the table.”¹²⁶ A local report signaled that IS and the allied forces reached a deal, granting IS such safe passage.¹²⁷ However, on February 10, 2019, US-backed forces resumed their effort to oust IS from its last sliver of land in east Syria.¹²⁸ On March 23, 2019, the Syrian Democratic Forces liberated Baghuz, IS’ last occupied town in Syria.¹²⁹

¹²⁰ Al Wafd (2018); and Al Ghad Press (2018).

¹²¹ Rukmini Callimachi, “A Desperate Exodus From ISIS’ Final Village,” *The New York Times*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/world/middleeast/isis-baghuz.html>.

¹²² DeirEzzor24, “Translation: DeirEzzor24 Obtains Terms of The Deal between Daesh and Allied Forces,” *DeirEzzor24*, February 7, 2019, <https://deirezzor24.net/archives/9273>; and Author interview with DC08, February 9, 2019.

¹²³ Almohammad and Speckhard (2017); and Author interview with DC05, October 3, 2018; and Author interview with DC08, February 9, 2019.

¹²⁴ Author interview with DC03, October 5, 2018; Author interview with DC02, December 4, 2018; Author interview with DC05, December 5, 2018; Author interview with DC06, December 6, 2018; Author interview with DC04, January 4, 2019; Author interview with DC02, January 21, 2019; Author interview with DC09, February 1, 2019; Author interview with DC08, February 3, 2019; interview material, PHOTO-2019-01-30-1, and PHOTO-2019-02-03-2; and Author interview with DC05, February 6, 2019; Author interview with DC010, February 6, 2019.

¹²⁵ Author interview with DC011, January 14, 2019.

¹²⁶ Callimachi (February 6, 2019).

¹²⁷ DeirEzzor24 (2019).

¹²⁸ Ben Wedeman, Kareem Khadder and Eliza Mackintosh, “US-backed forces face fierce resistance from ISIS in ‘final battle,’” *CNN*, February 10, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/02/10/middleeast/syria-sdf-isis-final-battle-intl/index.html>.

¹²⁹ Rukmini Callimachi, “ISIS Caliphate Crumbles as Last Village in Syria Falls,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/23/world/middleeast/isis-syria-caliphate.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>.

Based on the accounts of regional intelligence officials, a report uncovered an attempted coup to kill al-Baghdadi by a foreign element of his own terrorist organization.¹³⁰ However, the timing of this coup attempt, January 10, 2019,¹³¹ was reported to have happened months earlier, sometime in late 2018.¹³² In any case, it seems that the attempt on al-Baghdadi's life followed a meeting with his top lieutenants.¹³³ Moreover, during the meeting, IS' leader and his top operatives discussed a few regrouping contingencies, including the Syrian-Iraqi border, the Syrian Desert in the south of the country, and Idlib.¹³⁴ It was agreed that whenever IS lost its last remaining footholds in eastern Syria, a network of sleeper cells, under the leadership of a faction by the name *Jaish al-Amniyin* (the army of security forces), would start its operations in IS' former strongholds across Syria.¹³⁵ A similar pattern was observed in Iraq through the last months of 2018.¹³⁶ Advisors from IS security forces appeared to favor regrouping and rebuilding the organization's depleted capabilities in Idlib, presenting it as the organization's best option.¹³⁷ The plan, should IS' remnants make it to Idlib, "is to move to [THD] strongholds, keep recruiting AQ loyalists," and, whenever the timing was deemed appropriate, "fold [the jihadi group] under [its] banner."¹³⁸

Conclusion

Two recent official assessments suggest that IS still leads thousands of dispersed battle-hardened fighters in Syria and Iraq, as well as commanding eight branches, overseeing the operations of over a dozen networks, and thousands of supporters around the

¹³⁰ Martin Chulov, "Isis leader believed to have fled coup attempt by his own fighters," *The Guardian*, February 7, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/07/isis-leader-believed-to-have-fled-coup-attempt-by-his-own-fighters?CMP=share_btn_tw.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Author interview with DC011, January 28, 2019; Author interview with DC09, February 1, 2019; and Author interview with DC08, February 9, 2019.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Author interview with DC011, January 28, 2019.

¹³⁶ Mike Giglio, "The Trump White House Says ISIS Has Been Defeated In Iraq. The Data Says Otherwise," *BuzzFeed News*, October 31, 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/mikegiglio/trump-isis-iraq-defeat-attacks>.

¹³⁷ Ibid; Author interview with DC09, February 1, 2019; and Author interview with DC08, February 9, 2019.

¹³⁸ Author interview with DC011, January 28, 2019.

globe.¹³⁹ These reports argue that a reduction in counterterrorism efforts to defeat IS may allow the terrorist organization to regroup and rebuild its depleted capabilities.¹⁴⁰ These concerns were echoed by Gen. Joseph Votel, the commander of U.S. Central Command.¹⁴¹

The findings presented here provide further support to these assessments. It appears that IS has plotted a contingency plan to regroup and facilitate accelerated capacity-building. It has done so in a clandestine fashion for over two years. The operation to infiltrate and build the capacity of THD, recruit from AQ's jihadi constituency, eliminate potential threats, and enforce measures of organizational alignment between the two groups is a testament that IS leadership, despite significant losses, was still able to orchestrate sophisticated covert operations. That said, it is hard to determine the effectiveness of IS' co-optation of THD and whether this operation is still active or has reached its desired outcome. Such assessments still require further investigation.

This effort evidences the insight gained from primary data collection and tribe building. Such methods stand to provide critical details on insurgent groups. However, notwithstanding that different means of optimizing the validity of the data—like, for example, triangulation, contradictory evidence analysis, and respondent validation—were used, this endeavor relies on human sources and thus, it is bound to suffer from associated caveats. That said, it is the hope of this author that the findings of this investigation will improve academics' and practitioners' understanding of this enemy menace and allow them to use appropriate methods for assessing its capabilities and set better-informed policies to degrade its assets.

¹³⁹ Daniel Coats, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," *Congressional Testimonies 2019*, January 29, 2019, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR---SSCI.pdf>; and "Operation Inherent Resolve and other Overseas Contingency Operations," *Department of Defense Office of Inspector General*, February 4, 2019.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Barbara Starr, "Votel: 'Tens of thousands' of ISIS fighters in Syria and Iraq," *CNN*, February 11, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/02/10/politics/votel-on-syria/index.html>; Barbara Starr, "Top US general begins farewell tour amid orders to withdraw from Syria, Afghanistan," *CNN*, February 10, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/02/10/politics/votel-centcom-farewell-tour/index.html>.