# The Armed Opposition in Northwest Syria

May 15, 2020

## **Executive Summary**

This report details the current status, structure, and balance of power -Sham (HTS) and Turkish-backed armed opposition forces in northwestern Syria. The first section outlines the process by which Turkey has come to dominate -HTS armed opposition through a series of direct interventions and the reduction of regional and global engagement. The report provides a brief overview of opposition infighting and provides a structural diagram of the current order of battle and relations between non-HTS armed opposition groups supported by Turkey. The second section addresses the current status of HTS and non-HTS opposition armed groups and details the tense balance of power that exists between HTS, rivals, and Turkey. HTS is in an untenable position and is facing almost inevitable conflict with more hardline elements, Turkey-backed groups, or both.

An organizational chart detailing relations between various opposition groups is provided in Figure 2 below, which may serve as a useful guide for readers unfamiliar with some of the groups discussed below.

## Introduction

Thousands of armed groups have formed over the course of the Syrian conflict. Most of these, formed between 2012-2013, or fepatilits, liceno ii 0.000074 (die (or h) a (die do 500) (i) 0.0000 and a between 2012-2013, or fepatilits, liceno ii 0.000074 (die (or h) a (die do 500) (ii) 0.0000 and a between a name or a YouTube video that were quickly subsumed into rapidly growing armed movements and unions. By the end of 2012, the rate of new formations had begun to decline,

and difficult process of consolidation. Each subsequent union of groups seemed to last longer than its predecessors, but all were plagued by competing visions for the future of Syria, competition for resources, and, perhaps most importantly, rivalries among external backers.

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than coalesce. Each region reflected the closest neighboring country more than any national priority or vision. Eastern Syria became dominated by Kurdish-led forces and ISS, Hezbollah played a major role

opposition-held territory shrunk progressively closer to the Turkish border, and as erstwhile international backers of the opposition turned away, Turkey has re-forged the Syrian opposition into a tool of its merely a Turkish

tool the two have both common interests and amity, but it is Turkish interests that will define the future

# The Turkish-Backed Free Syrian Army

# **Operation Euphrates Shield**

Current armed opposition group structures began to take shape in 2016 with Operation Euphrates Shield (OES). OES represented the first direct Turkish military intervention in Syria and resulted in the formation of a loose umbrella network of armed groups supported by Turkey for the duration of the offensive. OES goals were defined by Turkish interests, namely blocking the establishment of a land bridge between the Kurdish-dominated regions of Afrin and Menbij. To accomplish this, OES fought primarily against ISS and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) during the offensive, but, notably, refrained from engaging with Syrian government forces.

Following the end of the offensive in March 2017, opposition armed groups supporting OES sat largely idle in northern Aleppo governorate for a full year. Physically separated from the ongoing fight between the government of Syria armed forces and opposition armed groups in Hama and Idleb and barred from engaging with Syrian government forces to their south, opposition armed groups supporting OES began fighting amongst each other as they sought to establish themselves in their new territory.

# **Operation Olive Branch**

The second major development in

#### Figure 1: Recorded incidents of infighting between non-HTS opposition groups in NW Syria. Data from <u>ACLED</u>.

The end of Operation Olive Branch also brought groups from the newly formed Syrian National Army (SNA) into contact with opposition territory in Idleb for the first time. The opening of a new land corridor between northern Aleppo governorate and Idleb led to a sharp increase in fighting between -Sham (HTS) and a newly-formed union between Ahrar al-

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# Current Status of Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham

-Sham (HTS) is the latest iteration of a long series of hardline armed movements that have formed around Jabhat al-Nusra, a former al-Qaeda affiliate. This latest iteration took shape in January 2017 with a merger between Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (with Jabhat al-Nusra at its core), Jaish al-Sunna, Liwa al-Haqq, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, and the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement. Since its formation, some member groups have split or have been restructured, but despite all the changes, HTS is, at its core, the latest iteration of Jabhat al-Nusra. Since its formation at the outset of the Syrian conflict, Jabhat al-Nusra has fought in every governorate of Syria and has increasingly sought to portray itself as a purely Syrian initiative. In 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra announced that it had split from al-Qaeda, began absorbing likeminded armed factions, eliminating rivals, and eventually formed the Salvation Government to administer opposition-held territory in NW Syria. Long considered the dominant actor in NW Syria, HTS now finds itself contending with a large presence of Turkish and Turkish-backed forces. With a shaky ceasefire in