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The incoming 'Islamic State' of Syria

After decades of secular authoritarianism, Syria now teeters on the edge of an even graver threat: a fundamentalist state led by the Islamist victors of the 'revolution,' threatening to replace one dictatorship with another and plunge the country into a new era of oppression and religious intolerance.

Three weeks after Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) [seized power](#) in Damascus, Syrians find themselves caught between hope and trepidation. While many celebrate the fall of Bashar al-Assad's Baathist dictatorship, they fear the rise of an Islamic state that could impose oppressive laws and replicate the authoritarianism they sought to escape.

The Cradle's [recent visit](#) to Idlib, Aleppo, and Damascus reveals signs that a fundamentalist religious state, accompanied by a brutal security apparatus, is already emerging. For Syrians, the question is no longer about change, but the price they will pay for it.

'Let's watch and see'

"When Assad fell, we celebrated a lot," a Syrian women's rights activist informs *The Cradle*. But if Syria's new government, led by former Al-Qaeda leader Abu Mohammad al-Julani, who now goes by his real name Ahmad al-Sharaa, imposes Islamic law on Syria and severely restricts women's rights, "we will resist them," she asserts.

When asked if she feared a return to the days when militants from Julani's HTS (previously known as the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front) [executed women](#) for adultery in public squares in Aleppo during the war, she states:

"So far, Julani is saying that these were mistakes we made in the past. I don't know if these are lies. I don't trust him. But I say to myself, let's watch and see what will

happen. I just hope the government will respect our rights. No one here wants to repeat the past [the oppression of the Assad government], but in a different [religious extremist] way.”

Four more years

Many in Syria are waiting to pass judgment on Julani until a permanent government is formed. But on 29 December, Julani announced that a new constitution would not be written for three years, and elections would [not be held for four years](#), giving HTS plenty of time to consolidate their rule and impose their fundamentalist ideology on the state and society.

In response, one secular Syrian [noted](#) on X, “Let me get this straight, so we are trusting the protege of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to rebuild the future Syria and to give him four years of carte blanche to do so? Did I hear that correctly?”

Two days before, during Friday prayers at Aleppo’s Rahman Mosque, the imam addressed the question of women’s rights during his sermon. He stressed that Islam demands justice in society, but this does not mean equality between men and women.

Drawing on the medieval scholar Ibn Taymiyyah, synonymous with [takfirism](#) and infamous for advocating Alawite extermination, the cleric made a case for imposing Islamic law.

The imam discussed a recent protest in Damascus on 12 December, where demonstrators called for a civil state, dismissing those who attended as being part of a “mob.”

Activists had planned a protest in Aleppo to demand a secular state and equal rights for women; however, after seeing the reaction to the demonstration in Damascus, they decided to cancel it.

“We decided not to do the protest in Aleppo after we saw how the protestors in Damascus were treated,” the women’s rights activist tells *The Cradle*.

“The media called them ‘Shabiha’ or supporters of the old regime of Bashar al-Assad. So we didn’t feel comfortable to hold the protest,” she explains.

But a [protest](#) led by women *did* take place in Aleppo that day, at Saadallah al-Jabiri Square in the city’s center. But instead of calling for equal rights, a group of women dressed in head and face coverings, known as niqab, called for the establishment of an Islamic state.

Just a phase

Symbolism reinforces this ideological shift. A Shia poet’s statue in a public park has been veiled. Billboards of the new Islamist ministers in the current post-Assad transitional government – such as Prime Minister Mohammad Bashir and Justice Minister Shadi Mohammad al-Waisi – adorn Aleppo’s streets.

Justice Minister Shadi Mohammad al-Waisi vowed to implement Islamic law and has been at the center of controversy due to circulating videos from 2015 showing him attending the execution of two women accused of adultery. While [Verify-sy](#), citing an interim government official, confirmed the authenticity of the video, they clarified that Waisi was serving as a judge at the time.

As for Prime Minister Mohammad Bashir, the *New York Times* (NYT) [writes](#) that he is from the Jabal al-Zawiya region of Idlib, home to the Salafist armed group Saqour al-Sham, or the Falcons of Sham, which fought alongside Julani's Nusra Front against the Syrian Arab Army (SAA).

In 2007, he earned a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering and later went on to get another degree in "Shariah and law" from Idlib University in 2021. In the past, Bashir administered the Salvation Government, which Julani established to rule Idlib after Nusra's conquest of the governorate in 2015.

The NYT notes that it is not clear where Bashir was during the war to topple the Syrian government.



Billboards in Aleppo's streets of the new Syrian Prime Minister Mohammad Bashir (left) and new Syrian Justice Minister Shadi Mohammad al-Waisi (right).

Idlibistan

One way to peer into Syria's possible future is to look at life under the Salvation Government in Idlib. Julani stated on 29 December, "The Idlib experience is not suitable for all of Syria, but it is a nucleus."

In 2017, US official Brett McGurk famously expressed concern that Idlib had become the "largest Al-Qaeda safe haven since 9/11." He did not mention that Julani's suicide bombers had conquered Idlib with the help of US-supplied TOW anti-tank missiles.

In a recent visit to Idlib City, *The Cradle* observed that all women in the city wore head coverings, including about half who also wore the niqab to fully cover their faces.

While walking in the city center and eating at a popular restaurant, *The Cradle* observed many HTS fighters casually carrying AK-47s and wearing military fatigues. Several wore black arm patches displaying the Islamic testimony of faith known as the Shahada.

Upon entering the city at the first roundabout, *The Cradle* saw a large mural commemorating the successful toppling of Bashar al-Assad, which HTS calls the Syrian revolution.

Above the mural was a massive white flag with the Shahada, rather than the new Syrian flag with three stripes and three stars. It is the same flag that is raised in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.



Mural commemorating the toppling of Bashar al-Assad shows the new Syrian flag with three stripes and three stars, a text reading “A revolution for all Syrians,” and the dates 2011 and 2024 under the flag, which is shaped like the map Syria.



White flag raised above the 'Syrian Revolution' mural the with the Shahada printed on it. This is the same flag that is also raised in the Islamic State of Afghanistan.

Julani's mukhabarat

More concerning than the establishment of a fundamentalist religious government in Syria is the possibility that Julani will expand the security apparatus of the Salvation Government in Idlib to the rest of the country.

Many Syrians are happy to see the back of Assad's secret police – the feared *mukhabarat*, but Julani's *mukhabarat* in Idlib has been similarly brutal.

Julani has [appointed](#) Anas Hasan Khattab, a figure with known ties to Al-Qaeda and who previously oversaw general security operations in Idlib, as the new head of the country's General Intelligence Service. Soon thereafter, Anas [announced](#) the Syrian *mukhabarat* would be dissolved and restructured.

But regarding Anas's security apparatus in Idlib, Mohammed Ali Basha, a 29-year-old activist from Binnish in Idlib Governorate, told *Al Jazeera*:

“Over the past few years, I have noticed the injustice practiced against the people of the liberated areas [not controlled by Assad], and how the security branches affiliated with HTS have begun to commit the same criminal acts committed by Assad's security forces, such as killing under torture and arbitrary detention.”

In the same [protest](#) in Aleppo where women dressed in niqab called for an Islamic State, they were holding up pictures of their sons and husbands who had been detained in HTS prisons.

Earlier this year, protests erupted against the Salvation Government in Idlib after Abdul Qadir al-Hakim, a father of three and fighter in the Jaish al-Ahrar armed group, was detained for 10 months and tortured to death.

“We demanded that the General Security Service hand over my brother's body, but they told us that they buried him and gave us the address of the burial place,” Hakim's brother [told](#) *Al Jazeera*.

He found his brother's body in a mass grave in a large trench. “There were many graves without names, only numbered,” he said.

Foreign extremists

After HTS (at the time known as the Nusra Front) conquered Idlib in 2015, many Christians fled the city and neighboring villages. Many of their homes were taken over by Uyghur foreign fighters from the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), whose roots are in Xinjiang province in western China.

Uyghurs played a crucial role in helping Julani conquer Idlib province from the SAA. These foreign fighters may well be granted [Syrian citizenship](#) under the new transitional government, while Julani has [promoted](#) many to high ranks in Syria's new army.

While riding an old, overcrowded bus from Idlib City to Sarmada, a bustling town and HTS stronghold near the Bab al-Hawa crossing with Turkiye, *The Cradle* stood next to an Uyghur foreign fighter. He had clear Central Asian Turkic features and a long, flowing beard characteristic of Salafi Muslims.

In another instance, while riding in a microbus from the town of Darkush to Idlib City, *The Cradle* saw an Uyghur berating the driver for refusing to accept 10 Turkish liras less than the regular fare.

The Druze

Uyghur and Uzbek fighters from TIP now occupy many Druze homes in the village of Qalb Loze in Idlib province.

During the Nusra conquest in 2015, a Tunisian Nusra Front commander and his fighters [massacred](#) at least 20 Druze residents after one Druze man resisted the commander taking his home.

Uyghur and Uzbek fighters continued to [terrorize](#) the Druze residents in Qalb Loze and neighboring villages of the Jabal al-Summaq region for years.

During a visit to Qalb Loze, *The Cradle* observed that a large new mosque was constructed next to the ruins of an ancient church in the town and that the women almost all wore the niqab. In the past, Druze women in the village used to show their hair freely.

Locals speaking with *The Cradle* confirmed that many Uzbeks still reside in the village, and that Uyghur fighters from TIP previously occupied a military camp set up in the ruins of another ancient Christian church on a nearby hilltop.

Christianity in the new Syria

HTS has so far treated Christians in Aleppo well, assuring the community they have nothing to fear and providing armed men as security outside religious services.

The Cradle briefly spoke with several armed HTS fighters guarding the St. Elias Maronite Church in Aleppo before services on Christmas morning. The fighters were friendly, and there did not seem to be any tension between them and the worshippers entering the church. A group of young Christian men, unarmed and wearing matching blue coats, also stood guard outside the church.

The church had been heavily damaged by rockets [fired](#) by militant groups fighting the SAA during the war. When the Syrian army retook Aleppo from the militants in December 2016, Christians were able to light Christmas trees and safely celebrate the holiday from within the church's bombed-out façade.

After the SAA's victory in Aleppo in 2016, George Bakhsh, a Christian community leader, [told Reuters](#) the number of people attending mass across the city had “surged now that worshippers no longer feared missiles from rebel-held areas.”

But although the HTS fighters are now treating the Christians well, the memories of the expulsion of Christians from Idlib and the kidnapping and killing of Christians in Aleppo previously during the war are difficult for the Christian community to forget.

Concern mounted after a video clip went viral showing foreign militants from Ansar al-Tawhid, a group affiliated with HTS, [burning](#) down a Christmas tree in Suqaylabiyah's public square, a town in western Hama countryside, just days before Christmas.

More ominous are reports of the killing of an elderly Christian couple in Wadi al-Nasara, the Valley of the Christians, near Homs a week before. Initially reported as a robbery, it later emerged that the husband had been [beheaded](#), a common Al-Qaeda practice in the past, and the woman shot in cold blood.

When asked about HTS's assurances to protect Christians, one resident of Maaloula, an ancient Christian town near Damascus, [stated](#),

“Yes, but the point is that we already know them. Many of those who came to Maaloula under the banners of Nusra 10 years ago, who destroyed homes and killed residents, have returned since the regime fell.”



Worshippers gathered at the entrance of the St. Elias Maronite Church in Aleppo, which is guarded by HTS militants.

Destruction of Saint Simeon's pillar

Saint Simeon was a Christian ascetic who was born in 390 AD and died in 459 AD. He lived for decades on top of an 18-meter-high stone pillar, making him a prominent figure in the ancient world. A massive church and monastic complex were built on the ruins of Simeon's pillar. It became a major pilgrimage site that rivaled Jerusalem for over a thousand years.

During a visit to the site, *The Cradle* observed an ISIS logo painted on the guard tower at the entrance. Some guards from HTS greeted us as we exited the car. They were friendly and allowed us to enter.

Upon entering, *The Cradle* also observed that all the crosses had either been removed or destroyed and that militants previously occupying the site had used several churches for target practice. The entire façade of one church was littered with bullet holes.

Most importantly, the remnant of Saint Simeon's stone pillar was gone, and the walls surrounding its location in the center of the complex had collapsed from an explosion.

The Telegraph [claimed](#) in 2016 that the remains of the pillar were destroyed in a Russian airstrike.

However, there were no other signs of damage due to bombardment. It is improbable that an airstrike would precisely target the center of the complex, where the remnants of the stone pillar – sacred to Christians but considered idolatrous by Salafist Muslims – were situated. ISIS or HTS likely used explosives to demolish the remains of the pillar when they destroyed all the crosses at the site.

Too moderate for the extremists

It is still unclear whether Julani's claims about protecting Syria's minorities and establishing democracy appear to be an effort to deflect criticism from the international community while quietly erecting a fundamentalist religious dictatorship.

However, if Julani's commitments are sincere, this may create another problem for him and his US and Turkish backers.

A Syrian with numerous relatives who have fought for HTS tells *The Cradle* that many of Julani's fighters are angry about his public rhetoric promising to protect minorities and to hold democratic elections.

"They are very extreme. They are angry because they say this is not what they fought the Jihad for."

It is no accident that while traveling in Idlib, *The Cradle* observed a black metal sign that read, "Secularism is blasphemy" and another that read, "Democracy is idolatry."

Such signs have [previously](#) been cited as warnings of the potential future awaiting the rest of Syria should Damascus fall.

If an Islamic State is not already here, it is fast approaching.



A black metal sign in Idlib reading “Secularism is blasphemy.”

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