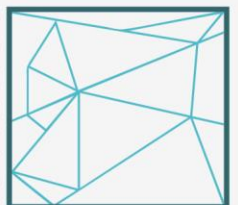


Between Reformist Discourse and Actual Repression: How Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham Handled Idlib Protests



- In an attempt to suppress the movement in northern Syria, HTS resorted to using excessive violence against protesters and carrying out widespread arbitrary arrests





Between Reformist Discourse and Actual Repression: How Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham Handled Idlib Protests

In an attempt to suppress the movement in northern Syria, HTS resorted to using excessive violence against protesters and carrying out widespread arbitrary arrests



Background

On 13 September 2024, Idlib Governorate in northwestern Syria [witnessed](#) a large-scale wave of protests, held in the city of Idlib, as well as Killi, Binnish, Qurqania, Kafr Takharim and Armanaz in the governorate's countryside. The protests extended to areas in the western countryside of Aleppo.

These protests are a [continuation](#) of a popular movement that began about seven months ago, specifically in late February 2024, against Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, both of whom are designated on [terrorist lists](#), demanding the overthrow of al-Jawlani.

HTS was [founded](#) under the leadership of al-Jawlani in January 2012 under the name of al-Nusra Front for the People of the Levant, affiliated with the global jihadist organization al-Qaeda.

HTS controls large areas in northwestern Syria, distributed between Idlib and areas in the countryside of Aleppo and Latakia. More than 4.5 million people [live](#) in Idlib alone, most of whom are displaced, according to Doctors Without Borders.

In Idlib, HTS [controls](#) the military and security aspects through its military wing and the General Security Service (GSS). It also controls the service and administrative aspects, through the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), its civilian façade. HTS reached this state of control in 2019, after [eliminating](#) its competitors of other military factions in the region.

This state of domination was accompanied by security, [administrative](#) and [legal](#) restrictions in Idlib, amidst several human rights violations against the population that were not accounted for. The response to these restrictions was limited to [a few protests](#) by civilians during the past years, where their greatest demand was for the HTS to leave Idlib, without detriment to al-Jawlani. HTS responded to them by arresting some of the participating activists without judicial warrants, arresting those criticizing it on social media, or by opening fire to [disperse the crowd](#).

Without any significant civil reaction to the violations, opposition to HTS's rule has been limited to ideological aspects, and by Hizb ut-Tahrir (Liberation Party, LP) that [promotes](#) a discourse calling for the restoration of the Islamic Caliphate." HTS faced the LP's activity with massive arrest campaigns in 2023, which were often followed by protests by the detainees' wives demanding the release of their husbands and "the downfall of al-Jawlani."

Internally, the authority of HTS remained stable as well, until it began a [series of arrests](#) against prominent security personnel and leaders in its ranks in the second quarter of 2023, on charges of "espionage for foreign countries and misusing communications."

Among the detainees was its former Iraqi leader, Abu Maria al-Qahtani, who was detained for six months before being released in March 2024, only to be killed in April 2024, when a suicide bomber blew himself up in his guesthouse in Sarmada, Idlib countryside. The release of al-Qahtani and other detainees came after al-Jawlani succumbed to the pressure of their supporters within HTS, especially since the arrest campaign was described as "fear or anticipation of a coup that the Iraqi leader was preparing."

[Al-Qahtani](#) was HTS' official in charge of communication with external parties, such as the Syrian National Army (SNA) factions, as well as prisoner exchange deals with the Syrian government and other parties to the conflict.

HTS worked to [shut down the “espionage” file](#) in February 2024, as al-Jawlani pledged to hold accountable those who committed violations, including “torture”, against detainees. However, the internal unrest within HTS and the arrest operations—with the absence of statistics on the number of detainees or those released—bore the seeds of the most recent protests against HTS.

These protests began when a family learned of the death of their son on 24 February 2024, due to torture in one of the HTS prisons, after he was detained for about ten months on the same charges.

The victim, Abdul Qader al-Hakim, known as “Abu Obeida Tal Hadya,” was a member of the Jaysh al-Ahrar faction, which is militarily supported by HTS, as it is one of the factions included in al-Fath al-Mubin operations room that HTS runs.

Abu Obeida was arrested by the GSS in April 2023, due to disagreements with one of the HTS’ factions that controlled the northern countryside of Aleppo at the time, as he refused to allow its members to enter his village, Tal Hadya, to arrest people, according to sources’ [statements](#) to Enab Baladi.

According to Enab Baladi, the victim's family refused to hold a funeral for their son without his body. Therefore, HTS directed them to the grave site in Sheikh Bahr area, in the western countryside of Idlib, where the young man was buried. A military group from Jaysh al-Ahrar transported the body, lead the grieving processions for it in several areas in Idlib countryside, and reburied it in the eastern part of the city.

The people joining the processions shouted slogans against HTS and its leader, as anger prevailed among the people of Tal Hadya and the southern countryside of Aleppo in general, especially after it became clear that HTS had prepared a grave and a headstone with the young man's name and a recent date of death, whereby his death was marked as if it happened after the victim's fate was exposed.

The anger spread to other areas in Idlib. On 25 February, this anger turned into a massive movement, as protesters took to streets every Friday. The first [protest](#) was held at the main roundabout of Sarmada. While the protests were mostly completely peaceful and civil, some were infiltrated by groups with specific goals, such as the LP.

In this report, STJ sheds light on the protests and demands of protesters in HTS-held areas, and the HTS’ response to the unprecedented civil movement, based on six interviews with activists and protesters who originate from Idlib or reside in it. Two of these protesters were arrested due to their peaceful activism.

While obtaining their informed consent, the sources were informed about the voluntary nature of the interview and how the information they shared would be used, including for the publication of this report. All sources asked for the withholding of their identities and other identifying information, due to concerns about potential reprisals by security services affiliated with HTS. Accordingly, STJ used pseudonyms to refer to them.

STJ [documented](#) HTS’ involvement in forcible disappearances on the ground of “espionage”, and against those criticizing it. One incident included arresting an activist in 2015, whose fate remained unknown until 2021, when his family learned that he was being held in one of HTS’ prisons in Idlib.

Causes and Demands of Protests

Activists and protesters interviewed by STJ for this report highlighted the situation in their cities under HTS' control. They indicated the series of repressive practices that affected the population in each area, which formed a cumulative situation that prompted the residents to protest.

Hazem al-Abdullah,¹ one of the movement's activists from Kafr Takharim, stated that the reasons behind the protests date back to 2019, when HTS seized control from the Faylaq al-Sham/Sham Legion and monopolized the security, military, service, relief and institutional aspects. He added:

“They began to exert significant pressure on the city's residents who opposed their control, such as arresting revolutionary figures who challenged their presence and authority, depriving bakeries of flour supplies, controlling the city's drinking water (by cutting allocations to neighborhoods and homes inhabited by opponents), and shutting down revolutionary institutions (i.e. established after the city was liberated from Syrian government forces), whose goal was providing services to the residents. Additionally, they closed the University of Human Medicine, which had around 600 students, due to its affiliation with the Syrian Interim Government, and many others.”

Hazem says that the people did not resist the violations for fear of arrest. However, the recent protests in other cities of Idlib prompted them to demand their rights. Therefore, the city witnessed the first protest on 8 March 2024, where the protesters demanded:

“Abolishing the taxes imposed on everyone, ending the authority of the security office over the city's families, dissolving the GSS, and forming an internal *Shura* (advisory) Council within Kafr Takharim city to participate in resolving the city's affairs and participating in its management.”

Through the SSG, HTS imposed exorbitant levies, under the guise of taxes or fees, on several sectors in areas under its control, indifferent to the dire economic and living conditions faced by both residents and displaced persons. The taxes were imposed on the sectors of [construction](#), [shipping](#), [currency exchange and remittances](#), [sanitation](#), and [the import, production and storage of medicines](#).

Hazem said that the protesters were not subjected to any attacks by HST security, but:

“Someone, who is close to a member of the GSS, came to me on the evening of the same day (the evening of the first protest), and told me that there were some HTS members among the participants in the protest, and they took photos of several people who participated in it, to collect information about the leaders of the movement in the city. He told me that my photo was among the ones taken ... After hearing this information, I decided to disappear from sight relatively, and to live outside my home for fear of HTS treachery, whether arrest, kidnapping or even killing.”

The motives of protesters in Ariha town in Idlib were similar, as Musab Haddad,² one of the activists in the movement, spoke about the reasons that pushed the people to protest. He said that since HTS took control of the town, it imposed its system on all institutions and set

¹ Online interview conducted by an STJ researcher with the witness on 17 June 2024.

² Online interview conducted by an STJ researcher with the witness on 23 June 2024.

impossible conditions for work in them. It also replaced the former employees with people close or loyal to it, so that it could impose its rulings in line with its interests. Also, HTS imposed taxes that affected “the minimum necessities of life”. Additionally:

“Through its security office, HTS arrested several revolutionary individuals who resisted and opposed its entry when it took control of Ariha town. They were revolutionary individuals who had a long history of opposing the al-Assad regime.”

The first protest in Ariha town took place on 4 March 2024, where the protesters demanded:

“Releasing all detainees, abolishing taxes on civilians under HTS control, and providing special immunity for activists and journalists and freeing them from the security surveillance exercised by HTS.”

Journalists and media professionals are subjected to repeated summonses by the GSS to investigate their media activity. In some cases, they are subjected to detention by HTS checkpoints spread throughout the governorate, according to an STJ [report](#) in early 2024.

Musab noted that the protests did not witness any violence or direct attacks at the beginning, as HTS was content to send delegations and notables supporting it to the protesters to hear their demands. He said: “However, the role of the committees and delegations was limited, they could not achieve our demands.”

In turn, the protester Saeed Yahya, a construction worker displaced from Hama to Jisr al-Shughur,³ said that the city witnessed the first protests on 3 May 2024, and that what prompted the residents to protest, in addition to HTS tight grip militarily, security-wise and institutionally, was that:

“It brought the families of their fighters, whether immigrants or Syrians, into this area, which created several problems between us and them, at all civilian levels. HTS was directing all relief from organizations to the families of their fighters, without taking into account our displacement circumstances and needs. Also, their members acted superiorly against the displaced in particular, and harassed them in every way possible, under the pretext that they sold their country and then came to their areas (HTS fighters), and many other accusations ... In addition to HTS’ security office in Jisr al-Shughur hegemony over civilians, where the emir of the security office, called “Abu al-Ashbal al-Muhajir,” carried out several operations of arrest, enforced disappearance and killing against civilians under the pretext of implementing the Sharia law.”

The first protest took place in Binnish in February 2024, driven by HTS’ unjust practices since it took control of the city “by force of arms.” Radi Salha, one of the movement’s activists,⁴ said that after HTS imposed its military hegemony:

“It took over the revolutionary civil institutions, and completely abolished them ... replacing these institutions with offices and departments directly affiliated with the SSG ... which created a state of chaos and internal divisions ... HTS also played a major role in arresting a large number of the people of Binnish through its security service represented by the GSS. It used to arrest anyone who did not march to the beat of its own drum, by fabricating accusations against the person so that it could imprison and

³ Online interview conducted by an STJ researcher with the witness on 17 August 2024.

⁴ Online interview conducted by an STJ researcher with the witness on 25 June 2024.

torture him in its prisons. It arrested many during these years, some of whom were released, while others' fate remained unknown”

Radi says that the city's residents submitted to all of HTS' conditions out of fear of their “unlimited brutality and crimes,” until its security forces raided the home of one of the city's activists “for unknown reasons,” and beat a woman in the house. The residents rose up and expelled HTS members, after which the city joined the movement in the rest of Idlib.

At first, HTS did not use any violence against Binnish protesters; however, it sent verbal threats. Radi said:

“At first, it confined itself to sending verbal messages through its notables and supporters that it would intervene through its security if this chaos continued in the region and would strike with an iron fist anyone who disrupts the institutional life of civilians. It also said that the protests are now authorized, and any protest (taking place) without official approval by HTS would be addressed both security-wise and legally.”

According to Radi, HTS carried out its threats and turned to using violence and excessive force against protesters during a massive protest on 17 May 2024. which was a shift that impacted all protesting points around Idlib during the same month.

Turning to Violence

In order to put an end to the protests, HTS initially adopted a “reformist” discourse, where the head of HTS' Supreme Fatwa Council, Abdul Rahim Atoun, announced in a [statement](#) published on 1 March seven steps to address the issue of detainees, including a pledge to visit prisons, issue a general amnesty for detainees, and form a “judicial committee” to look into the rights of those released, what they were subjected to, and hold accountable those involved in committing violations against them.

Four days later, on 5 March, the SSG [issued](#) an amnesty decree for perpetrators of crimes, which stipulated for the release of categories of detainees under specific conditions and exceptions. The SSG's Minister of Interior, Mohammed Abdul Rahman, said that the ministry released 420 prisoners under the decree, pledging to release others included in the amnesty.

On 6 March, the General Shura Council and the SSG held a meeting with representatives of the movement, which al-Jawlani attended, and [said](#): “It is the duty of any authority to listen to the demands of the people and implement those legitimate,” adding: “We are not clinging to anything at all. The easiest thing is to let the ship sail on its own.” On 13 March, al-Jawlani [called on](#) the Shura Council to “hold early elections and review the electoral law and its mechanisms, in a way that ensures expanded representation for the people.”

In the same month, on 23 March, the Shura Council [announced](#) the establishment of eight committees distributed throughout the “liberated” areas, claiming that they held meetings with the residents and resolved “25 percent of the cases they received.”

On 8 May 2024, some independent activists announced the formation of the Revolutionary Movement Gathering (RMG), whose purpose, according to activist Hassan Fawaz,⁵ displaced from Jobar in Damascus to Idlib, was to unify ranks, demands, and goals, as well as to protect

⁵ Online interview conducted by an STJ researcher with the witness on 19 June 2024.

the movement from chaos and exploitation by parties that “want to take the street and bend the compass again,” adding that the gathering came in response to:

“A simple and timid response from HTS, as it released some detainees who had been imprisoned for cases that did not directly affect HTS nor public opinion. There were shameful dialogue sessions with figures who were invited only to drum up support for HTS, without inviting the movement’s symbols or any of its leaders, with the intention of marginalizing them and polishing HTS’ image before the media and the world ... These provocative actions led to the expansion of the number of opponents demonstrating against it, and created a new state of popular resentment in the region.”

This was followed by a clear change in HTS’ discourse towards the protests, as it resorted to using excessive force to suppress the protesters, starting with a protest in Idlib on 14 May 2024.

[Videos](#) spread on social media, showing masked and armed members, who were later found to be members of the [General Security Department](#) in the SSG’s Ministry of Interior, assaulting the protesters, a number of whom were injured.

The next day, on 15 May, al-Jawlani [described](#) the protests as “a situation that has gone beyond its natural limits,” and that “the demands have deviated from their true course,” saying: “We warned previously that any infringement on public interests and the general rules of the liberated area is a crossing of red lines. The authorities will move to confront this matter.” Meanwhile, the SSG Minister of Interior, Mohammed Abdul Rahman, [threatened](#) the protesters to “strike with an iron fist any hand that wants to tamper with the security and safety of the liberated area and drag it into sedition.”

On the same day, protesters in Jisr al-Shughur, who left the al-Jisr al-Khabeer Mosque towards the city’s main square, were subjected to assaults. Saeed confirmed that the protesters carried revolutionary flags and banners, none of which included insults, only to be surprised by a group of the GSS:

“The members fired into the air to disperse the protest ... In addition to using rubber batons and wooden sticks, they even went as far as firing tear gas canisters ... When the chaos reigned, riot police vehicles and security armored vehicles advanced, heading directly towards the protesters ... An armored vehicle ran over two people before my eyes, as they were running away from HTS members. The armored vehicle ran over them and threw them to the ground several meters away, then the members immediately arrested them and put them in vans.”

Saeed said that the security members arrested a number of protesters, and tried to arrest his minor nephew (14 years old) after beating him. He said:

“They broke his foot by hitting him with wooden sticks. When they handcuffed him to arrest him, the protesters attacked the five officers, who quickly fled and hid behind their cars. Then, large security reinforcements arrived and spread out in the area, imposing a security cordon after we all fled.”

The statements of al-Jawlani and SSG were followed by a series of strict measures on 17 May 2024, where the security service and the military wing of HTS [imposed](#) a security cordon in Idlib city, by setting up checkpoints and restricting the movement of residents hours before

the Friday protests, and preventing civilians from other cities from entering it except for certain individuals, mainly family members of HTS personnel.

In light of the statements, the scene of violence was repeated in most areas that witnessed protests, including [Binnish](#), during a protest on 17 May 2024. Radi described:

“We ignored all these threats ... and went out in a huge protest. The HTS intervened quickly and attacked the protesters through the GSS. They beat the protesters and physically tortured them in the streets, and fired tear gas canisters. They also [ran over](#) a large number of civilian protesters with their armored vehicles, in addition to other attempts to run over [photographers and journalists](#), including the journalist (Omar Haj Qaddour).”

Radi added that the security forces arrested seven people that day, and repeated the same attacks in the protest that the city witnessed on 27 May 2024, which prompted the protesters to demonstrate only in the evening, and according to a spontaneous schedule, without announcing the date of the gatherings.

On 29 May 2024, the US Embassy in Syria posted a [statement](#) on its X account, saying: “We support the rights of all Syrians to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, including in Idlib. We deplore Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s regime-style intimidation and brutality against peaceful protestors as they call for justice, security, & respect for human rights.”

Arrests under Legal Cover

On 24 May, HTS security services launched an arrest campaign against a number of [activists](#) involved in organizing the movement, based on “judicial warrants,” which the Minister of Interior addressed in another escalating statement against the protestors. Mohammed Abdul Rahman [accused](#) the protesters of encouraging “carrying weapons and explosive belts,” [adding](#): “We had to present the matter to the Attorney General, who in turn gave permission to arrest a number of individuals responsible for this matter, where they will be referred to the competent judiciary in accordance with the rules.”

As several sources in the report stated, before resorting to judiciary, HST carried out numerous arrests of protesters or activists involved in organizing the movement, including activist Hassan, who was arrested on 27 May 2024, from his home in Idlib by armed, masked men accompanied by military vehicles.

Hassan remained detained for about 12 days, which he spent in solitary confinement in Branch 107, in Babisqa, which is supervised by the head of internal security files, Abu Ahmed al-Halabi. Hassan said:

“On 9 June 2024, the jailer came to me, blindfolded me, handcuffed my hands with a plastic belt, and took me to the office of the Assad al-Sunna (al-Halabi’s assistant). He told me: ‘Your release depends on your signature that you stay at home and not participate in or plan any actions or protests against the HTS, and not spread ideas that weaken the Muslims in the liberated areas,’ along other words written on the paper that I could not read completely. I had no choice but to sign in order to escape their grip and return to my family as soon as possible.”

Later, Hassan found out that his release had followed discussions between notables from Damascus and Idlib and a number of HTS’ leaders.

Wassim Mohammed,⁶ a protester from Killi, was arrested during a protest that preceded HTS' open use of violence. He said that he participated in the movement because "members of HTS and its security forces beat the wives of members of a party called Hizb ut-Tahrir".

He added that he was arrested, along with several other young men, during a protest that took place on 7 May 2024, according to what he recalls, and that the protest was attacked by several cars of the GSS, whose members beat the women present and broke the banners:

"While I was being arrested, four masked men attacked me and started beating me and smashing the loudspeaker. One of the members tied my hands with a plastic belt, put a large cover over my head so that I could no longer see anything, and put me in a van and beat me violently until we arrived at Branch 103, which is responsible for security tasks under the GSS."

At the branch, Wassim identified eight people, saying that the officers called three of them and took them to an unspecified location; all three remained detained at the time of the interview.

He said that he was called for interrogation on the second day of his arrest, where he was interrogated by a masked man, while another masked man filmed him, adding that he was beaten because he did not tell the interrogator who was coordinating the protests in his city and the source of their funding:

"He rang a bell on his desk and told an officer: 'Send the men in'. Two officers entered, threw me to the ground, put a shackle on my feet, and began to beat me violently and hysterically until my feet swelled ... I said to the interrogator: 'I will confess to whatever you want, just stop torturing me!' He asked the officers to stop torturing me and bring me back to the chair. He said: 'Tell me, who funds you?' I replied: 'I swear that I am a civilian, I am not affiliated with Hizb ut-Tahrir or any other faction.'"

After the interrogation session, the prison guard took Wassim, blindfolded, to solitary confinement, where he remained until his release on 28 May 2024, approximately 21 days after his arrest.

That was Wassim's second arrest by HTS services, as he had previously been summoned in early 2024 to the headquarters of the security office for civilians in Sarmada, where he was taken handcuffed and blindfolded from his blacksmith workshop, for failing to pay the tax that HTS imposed two years ago on industrial workshops, which amounted to \$2,000 annually.

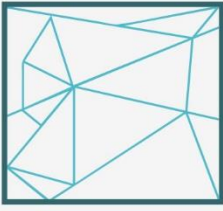
The increasing arrests and strict measures contributed to the decline of the movement during the following months. On 18 July 2024, the RMG announced its acceptance of [al-Wefaq initiative](#), [saying](#) that it had approved it "to spare the bloodshed" despite its failure to meet the aspirations of the protesters.

However, the protests began to regain momentum in September, with more than 10 protesting points recorded on the 13 September, in response to HTS security forces using excessive force against protesters who gathered in the center of Idlib on 10 September. This led to injuries among protesters, in addition to the arrest of a number of participating activists.

In its [latest report](#), issued 12 August 2024, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI) addressed the protests in Idlib, documenting a series of arrests, detentions and torture in HTS' prisons, as well as four executions of detainees,

⁶ Online interview conducted by an STJ researcher with the witness on 18 August 2024.

noting that the detainees had no legal representation, and were subjected to confidential judicial proceedings. The COI noted that these acts may amount to “war crimes,” adding that it had “reasonable grounds to believe that HTS members may have committed acts tantamount to enforced disappearance.”



ABOUT STJ

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) started as an idea in a co-founder's mind while attending the U.S. Middle-East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program (LDF) in 2015. The idea became a reality and flourished into an independent, non-profit, impartial, non-governmental human rights organization.

STJ's beginnings were more than humble; initially, it only reported stories of Syrians who experienced arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, or torture. Planted in fertile soil, the seed of this project grew into an established human rights organization licensed in the Middle East and the European Union. STJ today undertakes to detect and uncover violations of all types committed in all Syrian parts by the various parties to the conflict.

Convinced that Syria's diversity is a wealth, our researchers and volunteers serve with unfailing dedication to monitor, expose, and document human rights violations that continue unabated in Syria since 2011, regardless of the affiliation of the victims or perpetrators.

This publication was made possible with the support of Impunity Watch and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Netherlands. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of Impunity Watch or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Netherlands.

