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Issue Brief

Al-Qaeda 2.0 in Syria: Extreme Makeover of Salafi Jihadism

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S*ummary*

Notwithstanding the apparent break-up between Al-Zawahiri's Al-Qaeda and Al-Jolani's HTS in 2017, the new Syrian regime seems to be implementing Zawahiri's revamped jihadist strategy, which has taken almost two decades to evolve. The HTS regime has many foreign jihadists in its ranks, which could potentially initiate unrest in Central Asian states as well as threaten the moderate monarchies of Jordan, Egypt and the GCC.

A former member of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, deputy leader of ISIS until his bitter falling out with Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi,¹ Emir of the terror conglomerate Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the now de-facto leader of Syria, the 42-year-old Ahmad Al Shar'aa, popularly known as Abu Mohammad Al Jolani, presents himself to the world today as a reformed jihadist and a moderate Syrian nationalist.² Of the many Salafi-jihadist and nationalist opposition groups and coalitions, it was Al-Jolani's terror conglomerate HTS, which in a lightning charge ended the more than 50-year rule of the Baathist, Shia Alawite Al-Assad regime in Syria on 8 December 2024.

Iran's Broken 'Axis of Resistance'

By doing so, it literally drew a wedge in the Shia land-bridge across the Levant, stretching from Iran, Iraq, Syria up to Hezbollah-held Lebanese territory (the main actors that form the anti-Israeli Axis of Resistance), barring the non-contiguous Hamas in Gaza and Houthis in Yemen.³

The appearance of this so-called Shia Crescent above Arabian skies was first sighted by wary Sunni states after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq around 2004.⁴

However, the rise of Al-Zarqawi and then the ISIS caliphate in both Syria and Iraq, kept the so-called Shia ascendancy in check for a long time. But the blowback of the ISIS monstrosity itself triggered a global war against jihadism and it was only after the Russian intervention in Syria in September 2015 that helped US-backed coalition forces to decimate ISIS central from Syria and Iraq by early 2019.⁵

With ISIS out of the way, the spectre of Iranian hegemony loomed over the region again, threatening the Abraham Accords bonhomie of Israeli and Sunni states. For the beleaguered children of Shem (Jews and Arab states), the rise of Al-Jolani's forces in Syria came as a godsend, in that it broke Iran's so-called land bridge and with it the backbone of the supposed Axis of Resistance.

¹ Radwan Mortada, "[Golani vs. Baghdadi: Al-Qaeda's Internal War in Syria](#)", *Al-Akhbar* (English), 10 August 2013.

² Michael Safi and Jason Burke, "[The Reformed Jihadi: Al-Jolani, the New Most Powerful Man in Syria](#)", *The Guardian* (podcast), 17 December 2024.

³ Fabrice Balanche, "[The Iranian Land Bridge in the Levant](#)", *Telos: A Quarterly Journal of Critical Thought*, 2018.

⁴ The King of Jordan told MSNBC's Chris Matthews in 2004: "If it was a Shia-led Iraq that had a special relationship with Iran, and you look at the relationship (among) Syria, Hezbollah (and) Lebanon, then we have this new crescent that appears that would be very destabilizing for the gulf countries and actually for the whole region." See "[Jordan's Abdullah concerned Iraq May Tilt toward Tehran](#)", *NBC News*, 9 December 2004.

⁵ Jamie Dettmer, "[US-led Allies Finishing off Caliphate](#)", *VOA News*, Middle East, 1 March 2019.

From Terrorist to ‘Woke’ Freedom Fighter

The mood in the US-Israeli camp has since been ecstatic. Some Western media agencies have even started presenting the internationally designated terrorist organisation, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham as a revolutionary group and Al-Jolani as a ‘Woke’ Syrian freedom fighter.⁶ For instance, the CNN news network, which had once rated Al-Jolani as among the top 10 terrorists of the world, was the first to interview him and project him in a favourable light. In this interview, Al-Jolani tried to convince how he has matured with age. “A person in their twenties”, he said, “will have a different personality than someone in their thirties or forties, and certainly someone in their fifties. This is human nature.”⁷

As an incentive to this self-proclaimed reformed jihadist, the US has removed the US\$ 10 million reward on his head just about 10 days after the coup, and it apparently presumes that the rest of the HTS members have also been “reformed” in the process.⁸ Meanwhile, the UN special envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen as well as French and German foreign ministers have met Al-Jolani in Damascus, while Syria’s new foreign minister recently led a high-level delegation in January 2025 to Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar and Jordan seeking perhaps Arab and Islamic recognition, funds and supply of oil for the fledging new regime.

The new Syrian regime has given assurances, that despite HTS’ jihadist past, the caretaker government does not seek to wage wars with any country, and has even spoken about bringing home thousands of Syrian refugees who migrated to other countries during the civil war.⁹ Al-Jolani has also pledged to protect Christians and other minorities in Syria.¹⁰ He has also assured the world his administration was focused on protecting minorities and ensuring coexistence in the country, given the several ethnicities that form the Syrian nation—be they Arabs, Turkmen, Druze, Armenians, Circassians, Sabbeans, Kurds, Yazidis and others.

Some critics allege that the de-facto Syrian leader has quietly dropped the kunya ‘Al-Jolani’ from his name (which refers to the Golan Heights), in order to appease Israel.¹¹ When asked whether he is willing to push back the Israeli ingress into Syrian territory, with its forces reaching the town of Deraa, less than 20 kilometres

⁶ Alan McLeod, [“From ‘Terrorist’ to ‘Freedom Fighter’: How the West Rebranded Al-Qaeda’s Jolani as Syria’s ‘Woke’ New Leader”](#), *Scheerpost*, 13 December 2024.

⁷ Peter Bergen, [“Who is the Leader of Syria’s Rebels and What Does He Want?”](#), *CNN Politics*, 9 December 2024.

⁸ Bill Roggio, [“US Removes \\$10 million Reward for Hayat Tahrir al Sham leader”](#), *FDD’s Long War Journal*, 22 December 2024.

⁹ [“Syria’s Abu Mohammed al Jolani Demands Refugees Return to Rebuild Country”](#), *Deep News*, 15 December 2024.

¹⁰ [“Syria’s al-Jolani Pledges to Protect Minorities, Ensure Coexistence and Bring All Weapons Under State Control”](#), *Ahram Online*, 22 December 2024.

¹¹ [“How the West Rebranded Al-Qaeda’s Jolani”](#), *Consortium News*, 17 December 2024.

away from Damascus, Al-Jolani said that the Syrian nation is too exhausted “for us to enter new conflicts” and that Syrian territory will not be used to launch attacks against Israel.¹²

Foreign Jihadists in New Syrian Army

Al-Jolani’s statements may have honest intentions, but there still remains a critical wariness in some Western quarters who wonder whether the old jihadi has truly changed his spots or is he the same wolf, but in a sheep’s clothing. These fears have been reinforced by the choice of his new intelligence chief in Anas Hasan Khattab, who was once a senior ISIS officer¹³ and has been marked by the UN Security Council as a wanted Al-Qaeda terrorist on 23 September 2024.¹⁴ His appointment reminds one of Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Specially Designated Global Terrorist¹⁵ who is now the first deputy leader of Afghanistan and the acting interior minister of the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Taliban regime. The US has also placed a reward of up to US\$ 10 million for information on Sirajuddin Haqqani.¹⁶

Even more disturbing is the fact that the new Syrian defence forces will reportedly include foreign jihadist fighters in Syria, some holding high ranks, who are dissident Uzbeks, Chechens, Chinese Uyghurs, Turks, etc.¹⁷ It is possible that Syria may eventually become the launchpad for jihadist uprisings across CIS states, at the behest of the West against Russia and China. Although the new Syrian leader has asked all Syrian factions, including the HTS, to dissolve and merge into the Ministry of Defence, Al-Jolani has brazenly announced that elections in the country may take up to at least four years from now.¹⁸

¹² [“Syrian Rebel Leader: Territory Will Not be Used to Launch Attacks Against Israel”](#), *The Times of Israel*, 17 December 2024.

¹³ Yoni Ben Menachem, [“Al-Julani Appoints Senior ISIS Officer to Head of General Intelligence in Syria”](#), *Newsrael*, 29 December 2024.

¹⁴ [Anas Hasan Khattab](#), UN Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities, Sanctions List Materials, Narrative Summaries of Reasons for Listing.

¹⁵ [Sirajuddin Jallaloudine Haqqani](#), paragraph 20 of UN resolution 2160 (2014), the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988, the listing of individuals, groups, undertakings and other entities on the List.

¹⁶ United States’ Rewards for Justice offers reward of up to \$10 million for information on [Sirajuddin Haqqani](#).

¹⁷ Sebastian Usher, [“Foreign Fighters Given Senior Syrian Army Posts, Reports Say”](#), *BBC News*, 1 January 2025.

¹⁸ Sofia Ferreira Santos, [“New Elections Could Take up to Four Years, Syria Rebel Leader Says”](#), *BBC News*, 29 December 2024.

Reports of attacks on Christians and Alawites

There are also reports of attacks on Christians being conducted by HTS-linked jihadist forces in the historical Syrian city of Maaloula, where people still speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus Christ. There are reports of Christian cemeteries and large Crosses being vandalised, gunshots being fired near churches, and a Christian couple being brutally murdered under mysterious circumstances.¹⁹ Some Christian commentators fear that their community might disappear from Syria altogether, just as they have from Iraq following the rise of ISIS in that country.²⁰

Also raising alarm bells are demonstrations by tens of thousands of Shia Alawites who recently took to the streets in Latakia, Tartus, Homs, Hama and Qardaha in condemnation of the HTS militants’ desecration of an Alawite shrine in Aleppo, and the subsequent violence directed at the minority community.²¹ Thus, the jury is out on whether Al-Jolani is fully in control of Syria, or whether his words truly indicate an ideological shift in his thinking, as some fear it may be part of a calculated strategy aimed at winning approval and for consolidating power before potentially imposing a stricter and more religiously radical rule.

In fact, this Brief posits that Al-Jolani’s new regime may just be a revamped and self-proclaimed sugar-free version of Salafi-Islamism to establish a New Al-Qaeda 2.0 state, on the lines of a more devious Taliban 2.0 regime, which remains an Al-Qaeda affiliate in Afghanistan, and greeted Jolani’s coming to power in Syria. To some, the new Syrian regime led by HTS is a manifestation of Ayman Al-Zawahiri’s revised strategy to waylay the global campaign against terrorism.

Evolution of Al-Qaeda’s New Strategy

It is said that this virulent, newly morphed Al-Qaeda strain has been in the works since the battering the group received from the US-led coalition in Afghanistan in 2001. That drubbing led to a great deal of internal resentment and disaffection against Bin Laden’s elitist leadership, as the shaken and scattered members of Al-Qaeda ran for cover in Pakistan, Iran, Central Asia and West Asia. At that time, many Salafi Al-Qaeda ideologues like Abu Qatada were irate over Bin Laden’s Salafi compromise with doctrinally divergent Ashari-Deobandi Taliban.²² Some of them,

¹⁹ Dario Salvi, “[Crosses Destroyed and a Horrendous Murder: All is Not Well for Syria’s Christians](#)”, *Herald Malaysia Online*, 20 December 2024.

²⁰ “[Syria’s Christians, a Disappearing Community](#)”, *Le Monde*, 17 September 2024.

²¹ “[Syrians Take to Streets Nationwide Against Shrine Desecration; HTS Militants Fire on Protesters](#)”, *Press TV*, 26 December 2024.

²² Brynjar Lia, “[Abu Mus`ab al-Suri’s Critique of Hardline Salafists in the Jihadist Current](#)”, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Combating Terrorism Centre, Westpoint, December 2007.

like Abu Musab Al Zarqawi, were suspicious of Bin Laden, as his mother (Hamida Al-Attas) was a Shia Alawite from Syria.²³

Many of these hardcore Salafi-jihadists regrouped in Iraq to forge an even more rabid force under Abu Musab Al Zarqawi in 2003. After refusing to swear allegiance to Bin Laden for a whole year, Al-Zarqawi finally relented and renamed his group as *Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad Al-Rafidayn* (commonly known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq) in 2004.²⁴ Still Zarqawi acted mostly independent of Bin Laden’s control and carried out some of the most gruesome killings and beheadings—often showing himself personally carrying out the executions on video—which shocked the world and even made Al-Qaeda leadership squirm in envy.

Zarqawi’s strain of jihadism also found a formal strategic enunciation in Abu Bakr Naji’s e-book *The Management of Savagery* (or *Al-Idaratul Tawahhush*) in 2004.²⁵ The book posited a strategy for conducting horrific mutilations and killings in order to instil fear in the hearts of a much mightier enemy and to employ jiu-jitsu warfare to whittle down its strength in a prolonged war of attrition. The other jihadist work in the same respect was by Abu Musab Al Suri tome *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance*. In it, the author urged Muslims to carry out independent, anarchic warfare (*nizam la tanzim*) through endless lone wolf operations across the globe, which would then be owned by Al-Qaeda or its affiliates.²⁶

On the other hand, some Al-Qaeda members were completely disillusioned by the groups’ mode of warfare. One of them was Al-Qaeda’s co-founder and principal theologian Syed Imam Al Shareef, popularly known as Dr Fadl. A physician by profession, Dr Fadl’s book *al-Umda fi Idad al-Udda (The Essentials of Preparing for War)* was published in 1988 and was used as a jihad manual by Al-Qaeda in its Afghanistan training camps. In this handbook, he claimed that every able-bodied believer must participate in Islamic warfare. The book was deemed so dangerous by many Muslim states that even its possession led to a person’s arrest.²⁷

However, come 2004, this jihadist ideologue completely changed his views and in the book *Wathiqat Tarsheed Al-Amal Al-Jihadi (Document of Right Guidance for Jihad Activity)*, which was published in 2007, proclaimed “Muslims are prohibited from committing aggression, even if their adversaries commit aggression.” His book

²³ Mary Anne Weaver, “[The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi](#)”, *The Atlantic*, July/August 2006.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Laura Sullivan, “[Al-Qaeda’s Playbook](#)”, *NPR*, 27 June 2006.

²⁶ M.W. Zackie Masoud, “[An Analysis of Abu Mus’ab al-Suri’s ‘Call to Global Islamic Resistance’](#)”, *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2013, pp. 1–18.

²⁷ Lawrence Wright, “[The Rebellion Within: An Al Qaeda Mastermind Questions Terrorism](#)”, *The New Yorker*, 23 May 2008.

further states that “There is nothing that invokes the anger of God and His wrath like the unwarranted spilling of blood and wrecking of property.”²⁸

In fact, Dr Fadl became critical of Al-Qaeda and warned budding jihadists

Oh, you young people, do not be deceived by the heroes of the Internet, the leaders of the microphones, who are launching statements inciting the youth while living under the protection of intelligence services, or of a tribe, or in a distant cave or under political asylum in an infidel country. They have thrown many others before you into the infernos, graves, and prisons.²⁹

Meanwhile, other radical theologians like Abu Musab Al Maqdisi, the ideological mentor of Al-Zarqawi, disowned his disciple for his large-scale takfeeri attacks against the Shia community.³⁰ Similarly, Yousuf Al Qaradawi, in his book *fiqh Al Jihad*, called for financial support and solidarity with Palestinians and others, rather than violence.³¹

From Non-State Nihilism to State Authoritarianism

In the wake of these conflicting factions within the fold of Al-Qaeda, Bin Laden and particularly Al-Zawahiri adopted a devious and more adaptive approach, learning from failures of their own group and those of its breakaway faction, the ISIS. It is this ideological and methodological re-orientation that has helped Al-Qaeda to re-emerge under new formations. Taking advantage of the world’s focus on ISIS-related terrorism in recent decades, Al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups now seek to transition from selfless non-state actors into small proto-state regimes.

The lust for state power, territorial control and even international recognition now impels its franchises, be they the Taliban in Afghanistan or the supposed breakaway group HTS in Syria.

Despite Al-Zawahiri’s killing in Kabul in 2022, Al-Qaeda affiliates have stopped conducting terror strikes and reprisal attacks for the time being. With a weak or virtually non-existent central leadership, Al-Qaeda minions now don several and diverse shades of grey to camouflage and confuse the adversary.

The split of Al-Jolani’s Jabhatul Nusra from Al-Qaeda in 2016, and its merger with several armed jihadist factions under the HTS umbrella in 2017, left many CT experts

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*, Yale University Press, 2007.

³¹ Ewan Stein, “[Yusuf Qaradawi’s Jihad](#)”, *The Guardian*, 17 August 2009.

baffled. Citing Hassan Hasaan’s paper titled, “Jabhat Al Nusra and Al Qaeda: The Riddle, the Ruse and the Reality”,³² some experts like Mackenzie Holtz aver that although HTS may have cracked down on Al-Qaeda and ISIS factions in recent times, it should be viewed more as an effort by HTS leadership to consolidate power than a genuine change in ideology.³³

Thus, as recently as July 2024, the monitoring team of the UN Security Council Committee responsible for overseeing sanctions concerning ISIL (Da’esh) and Al-Qaeda, wrote a report in which they said that HTS is the predominant terrorist group in northwestern Syria.³⁴

Emphasis on Popular Support

It is also remarkable to find similarities in the HTS ideology and methodology with the intercepted letters and writings of Al-Zawahiri in his later years. For instance, he wanted the organisation to become more popular among the Muslim masses, which he admitted did not support the organisation after 9/11. Al-Zawahiri instructs Al-Zarqawi in his 2007 letter:

The mujahed movement must avoid any action that the masses do not understand or approve ... meaning we must not throw the masses (scant in knowledge) into the sea before we teach them to swim.³⁵

In her presentation to the US Committee on Homeland Security in the House of Representatives on 13 July 2017, Katherine Zimmerman, Research Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) said:

Al-Qaeda now prioritizes the Muslim world rather than attacking the West. It works hard to teach its religion to the masses, having learned through experience that too-rapid imposition of its views will alienate the population. It compares Muslims today to children, who must first learn right from wrong before they can be held accountable.³⁶

³² Hassan Hassan, “[Jabhat Al Nusra and Al Qaeda: The Riddle, the Ruse and the Reality](#)”, *The National*, 1 November 2007.

³³ Mackenzie Holtz, “[Examining Extremism: Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham \(HTS\)](#)”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 3 August 2023.

³⁴ [Letter dated 19 July 2024 from the Chair of the UN Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 \(1999\), 1989 \(2011\) and 2253 \(2015\) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant \(Da’esh\)](#), United Nations Security Council, 22 July 2024.

³⁵ “[Zawahiri’s Letter to Zarqawi](#)”, Combating Terrorism Center, Westpoint.

³⁶ Katherine Zimmerman, “[The Persistent Threat: Al-Qaeda’s Evolution and Resilience](#)”, Hearing Before the US Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence of The Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives, One Hundred Fifteenth Congress, First Session, Serial No. 115-21, 13 July 2017.

She said:

Al-Qaeda (like Hezbollah) brings basic services, food, water, electricity, justice and security, military skills and expertise to these communities, which accept al-Qaeda's presence based on a short-term calculation to secure their own survival.

This tactic is clearly evident in the HTS-ruled areas of Syria, where women avail more freedoms relative to their counterparts in ISIS-held territories and in Afghanistan. In Idlib, Gulf states and Turkey-based business groups have opened hotels and shopping malls, while the enclave under the HTS-backed Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) manages key sectors such as education, health and reconstruction. This Islamist mini-state, operates on a newly branded populist version of Shariah rule, a model that may be imposed on the rest of Syria in the future.

Grudging Acceptance of National Identities

Thus, Al-Qaeda now seeks to become more of a political Islamist than a militant jihadist power, acknowledging and accepting the reality and necessity of ethnic, cultural and nationalist identities, in addition to Islamic affiliations. There is even allowance for its affiliates to parley, negotiate, trade and even have political relations with hitherto unacceptable enemies, particularly the abominations (*taghut*) of liberalism and democracy.

According to Zimmerman, “Al-Qaeda purposely obfuscates its relationships with local (and nationalist) groups to better achieve its objectives.”³⁷ From the ethno-religious Pakhtoon nationalism of Deobandi Taliban, which seeks UN recognition, Al-Qaeda now supports Islamist nationalists in Libya and Syria, etc. Its Internet mouthpiece *Inspire* has even come out in support for Palestinian nationalist parties like Hamas, in the wake of the 7 October 2023 attacks.³⁸

As a corollary to these changes, Al-Qaeda has also learnt from the downfall of ISIS the importance of putting up a moderate face upon its extremist image. It now wants to win the media war, by making its leaders in Afghanistan and Syria pay lip service for protection of minorities and women.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Peter Smith and Lucas Webber, “[The Israel-Hamas War and Resurgent Jihadist Threats to Europe and the United States](#)”, *Lawfare*, 18 February 2024.

Media-Savvy Image Warfare

Even back in 2007 Al Zawahiri wrote to Al-Zarqawi about the benefits of image warfare. Thus, he wrote:

I say to you more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a race for the hearts and minds of our Umma. And that however far our capabilities reach, they will never be equal to one thousandth of the capabilities of the West that is waging a war on us.³⁹

Like Salafi Saudi Arabia, Al-Qaeda is also distancing itself from its extreme Salafi core, which is doctrinally opposed to Hanafi, Ashari and Maturidi Sunnis of Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, often mistaken for Sufi Islam. In fact, the Salafi-Ashari divide was one of the main causes for Al-Qaeda’s failure in Chechnya.⁴⁰ Its firebrand Salafi leader Basayev so antagonized the Hanafi and Ashari Chechen Sunni population in the Second Chechen War from 1999 to 2009, that the non-Salafi separatists eventually joined Russia. This setback set a domino effect and the Salafi-jihadists were rejected by religious groups in both Central Asia and in Indian subcontinent, where the Sunni community is mainly Hanafi-Ashari-Maturidi. However, HTS is trying to mend these differences, and unlike ISIS fully backs Deobandi Taliban as well as the largely Ashari SSG in Idlib.

Syria: Powder Keg of West Asia

Thus, the rise of HTS and the seeming attempt by some Western states to normalise relations with this Al-Qaeda-tainted grouping,⁴¹ is definitely bad news for global peace and security. With a slightly tweaked ideological agenda, this Al-Qaeda-tainted regime that has many foreign jihadists in its ranks, could potentially initiate unrest in many socialist states in Central Asia, and threaten even the moderate monarchies of Jordan, Egypt and the GCC states, in a new Arab Spring-like tumult.

With the crumbling of Syrian sovereignty, Turkey is likely to invade Kurdish territories in Syria, which might free thousands of ISIS members imprisoned in Kurdish jails. Thus, Syria has become a powder keg, ready to explode violent extremism that would have a huge fallout across West Asia, Central Asia and even Europe. With the rise of Sunni Turkey’s prospects in Syria, at the expense of Shia Iran’s loss in its Alawite ally, both Taliban and Pakistan may feel exultant in the short term. However, India should be wary of renewed jihadist threats emanating from the northwest, as well as from the maritime winds of radicalism lashing our eastern and southern shores.

³⁹ [“Zawahiri’s Letter to Zarqawi”](#), no. 35.

⁴⁰ [“Sufi-Salafi Institutional Competition and Conflict in the Chechen Republic”](#), *Geohistory*, 21 September 2016.

⁴¹ [“Moderate enough? West Eyes Normalisation with HTS-led Syria”](#), *France24*, 17 December 2024.

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