

## **From Fragmentation to Victory: How the Syrian Armed Opposition Toppled the Assad Regime**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In one of the most significant geopolitical events of 2024, a coalition of rebel groups united under the Military Operations Command (MOC), led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), successfully overthrew the Assad regime after 13 years of civil war in Syria. Recent scholarship has identified the fragmentation of Assad's military forces, the lack of international support from allies such as Iran and Russia, and the unification of the Syrian armed opposition as key factors contributing to the regime's fall. However, current research has paid limited attention to the role of the unification of the Syrian armed opposition in the fall of the Assad regime. In this study, I draw on recent scholarship regarding the internal power balance and inter-group relations within rebel coalitions to theoretically examine the factors that enabled the MOC's successful unification. I argue that the hegemonic and relational nature of the Syrian armed opposition movement was a crucial factor that enabled Syrian rebel groups to overthrow the Assad regime and take control of the country. Using an in-depth case analysis of the MOC, I employ process tracing to incorporate insights from expert interviews and secondary sources. This study enhances our understanding of the factors behind the collapse of the Assad regime. Furthermore, my research sheds light on the reasons and circumstances that facilitated the unification of Syrian rebel groups into a single coalition, demonstrating how this unification contributed to their success in overthrowing the Assad regime. This work further contributes to the broader debate on the outcomes of civil wars, particularly regarding cases of rebel group victory.

## Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>ACRONYMS .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>RESEARCH DESIGN .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>THEORY .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<i>TABLE 1: DIAGRAM ILLUSTRATING THE THREE CAUSAL STEPS IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS .....</i>	<i>14</i>
<b>ANALYSIS.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>THE HEGEMONIC ROLE OF HTS .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>A COMPLEMENTARY COALITION.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>THE RELATIONAL LOGIC BEHIND THE ALLIANCE.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>ENDNOTES .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>32</b>

## ACRONYMS

AS: Ahrar al-Sham

ACLED: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data

FSA: Free Syrian Army

HTS: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

IRGC: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

JN: Jabhat al-Nusra

MOC: Military Operations Command

MST: Movement Structure Theory

NDF: National Defense Forces

NLF: National Liberation Front

SSG: Syrian Salvation Government

UCDP: Uppsala Conflict Data Program

## INTRODUCTION

In December 2024, a significant geopolitical event unfolded as a coalition of rebel groups, unified under the Military Operations Command (MOC) and led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), decisively defeated Assad's regime forces, marking a definitive end to the Syrian civil war. Within just 12 days and with minimal bloodshed, the MOC executed a military operation that successfully seized control of the capital and the country, ultimately forcing the autocrat Assad to flee (Salih, 2025). Existing research on the factors leading to the fall of the Assad regime emphasizes the fragmentation of Assad's forces, lack of international support, and the unification of the Syrian armed opposition. While these studies highlight critical elements that contributed to Assad's downfall, a clear gap remains regarding the unification of the Syrian armed opposition under the MOC.

Since the onset of the Syrian civil war, the Syrian opposition has been consistently fragmented and engaged in ongoing territorial battles. However, in 2020, various rebel groups came together under the MOC (Haenni and Drevon, 2025). Although the literature recognizes this unification as a factor in Assad's fall, it has not thoroughly explored the motivations and circumstances that led to this cohesion, nor how the coalition managed to remain intact without reverting to fragmentation. This thesis aims to address that gap by posing the question: how did the Military Operations Command contribute to the fall of the Assad regime? By specifically analyzing the internal power balance and inter-group relations within the MOC, I intend to enhance our understanding of this pivotal moment.

This research is anchored in the theoretical framework surrounding rebel group coalitions and the internal balance of power within these alliances. The central argument posits that the hegemonic and relational dynamics of the Syrian armed opposition movement significantly contributed to Assad's downfall. By explaining the hegemonic role of HTS within the MOC before and after its inception, I will illustrate why the coalition remained unified and

how this cohesion underpinned the MOC's military success. Furthermore, by examining the relationships between rebel groups within the MOC, I will elucidate why smaller factions chose to actively contribute to the coalition's efforts.

Using a qualitative in-depth case analysis of the MOC during the Syrian civil war, I focus specifically on the period from 2017, when HTS and Ahrar al-Sham clashed, to December 2024, when the Assad regime was overthrown by the MOC. My primary data collection involved interviews with experts on the Syrian civil conflict, while secondary sources included reports from European agencies and prominent European think tanks. My analysis utilized process-tracing and triangulation methods to align insights from my primary sources with secondary data.

This research presents three main contributions. First, it enhances the literature on the fall of the Assad regime by deepening our understanding of the reasons and circumstances that enabled the successful unification of the MOC and its crucial role in the regime's fall. Second, the findings of this thesis can be generalized to other instances of rebel group coalitions and victories, thus contributing to the broader literature on civil wars. Ultimately, my research seeks to assist policymakers and scholars in predicting the outcomes of civil wars involving coalitions of rebel groups, as well as in formulating effective strategies to engage with these coalitions.

The thesis unfolds as follows: in the first section, I will contextualize my research by reviewing the literature on the factors contributing to the fall of the Assad regime. In the second section, I will discuss my main theoretical points, drawing on Movement Structure Theory (MST) developed by Krause (2017) and the relational theory proposed by Topal (2025), as these serve as foundational theories for my research. In the third section, I will triangulate insights from expert knowledge and reports to conduct a thorough analysis of the reasons behind the MOC's unification and success, highlighting how this cohesion was a critical factor

in the fall of the Assad regime. I conclude by suggesting avenues for future research on coalitions of rebel groups.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Existing literature has examined the fragmentation of state military forces, the lack of external support, and the unification of the Syrian armed opposition as key factors leading to the fall of the Assad regime.

Firstly, Assad maintained his grip on power for 14 years by building a fragmented, yet loyal, network of paramilitary groups financed by the state and by Iran (Grinstead, 2017; Voller, 2022). With the outbreak of civil war in 2011, the regime's army found itself unprepared to address the unconventional warfare tactics employed by the Syrian armed opposition. This situation compelled the Assad regime to rely on armed paramilitary groups to defend its territories. (Grinstead, 2017). In 2013, the Assad regime formalized its collaboration with hundreds of these militias by establishing the National Defense Forces (NDF), an umbrella organization that encompassed all paramilitary groups aligned with the regime (Grinstead, 2017; Voller, 2022). However, by 2024, the morale of these forces had plummeted due to the regime's brutality and corruption, leading to massive desertions as soon as the Syrian armed opposition initiated the military operation in late November (Wedeen, 2025).

Secondly, the Assad regime's survival had long depended on support from international allies, such as Russia and Iran, as well as assistance from external actors like Hezbollah (Cafarella and Zhou, 2019; Günay et al., 2025; Saputra, 2025). Russia provided air and logistical support to the Assad regime in territories controlled by rebel groups, enabling Assad's forces to defend their own territories and to advance into areas previously held by rebel groups. Meanwhile, Iran offered substantial ground support through operations alongside the NDF, utilizing the Quds Forces, a division of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). At the

same time, Hezbollah deployed thousands of soldiers to support Assad's militias, invigorating the Syrian army (Saputra, 2025). However, by December 2024, both Iran and Russia were engaged in two simultaneous conflicts (with Israel and Ukraine, respectively), diverting their economic and military resources, while Hezbollah suffered significant defeats at the hands of Israel, forcing the group to prioritize its own survival. Without these allies, the Assad regime fell rapidly with minimal resistance (Gunay et al., 2025).

Thirdly, since the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011, persistent fragmentation among Syrian rebel groups represented a significant weakness for the opposition front, hindering its ability to present a viable alternative to the Assad regime (Perkoski, 2022). The opposition initially appeared united under the Free Syrian Army (FSA), but ideological divisions and the rise of Islamist groups led to increased fragmentation, clashes for territorial control and a loss of crucial financial support from the United States and Gulf States (Valensi, 2019). In 2020, after significant territorial losses to the Assad regime and the victory of HTS over its rival Ahrar Al-Sham, the Syrian armed opposition consolidated under a new command structure, al-Fath al-Mubin, which coordinated most opposition forces aimed at overthrowing the regime (Haenni and Drevon, 2025). Led by HTS, this coalition of rebel groups rebranded itself in 2023 as the MOC and was primarily responsible for the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 (Sallam, 2024). The reasons behind the successful unification of the rebel groups under the MOC, and how they maintained unity, remain understudied in the literature.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

I adopt a qualitative in-depth case analysis using process tracing. As noted by Van Evera (p. 65, 2016), “process-tracing of a single case can provide a strong test of a theory.” My goal is to assess how the nature of the MOC coalition contributed to the end of the Assad regime. Case study analysis serves as a highly suitable tool for establishing robust causal inferences



regarding how the independent variable influenced the dependent variable, thereby allowing for hypothesis testing (Van Evera, 2016; Barakso et al., 2014). I utilize a qualitative approach that allows me to deeply examine the dynamics of the coalition, ensuring that I don't oversimplify or overlook essential nuances in its evolution.

The case of the Syrian opposition movement presents a compelling opportunity to test my theoretical framework, as it involves a coalition of rebel groups that successfully overcame the regime and seized control of the capital and the country. Within this coalition, a hegemonic group, HTS, played a crucial role in unifying the factions after years of fragmentation, while smaller groups, Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham, contributed significantly to the operations that led to the regime's defeat. Moreover, the event analyzed in this research is relatively recent and has not been thoroughly examined in academic literature, particularly the unification of Syrian rebel groups within the MOC, which has largely been overlooked.

I collected data through both primary and secondary sources. For my secondary sources, I utilized reports from European agencies, such as the European Union Agency for Asylum, as well as documents from international governmental bodies like the U.S. Department of State. Additionally, I referred to reports and analyses from relevant organizations such as the International Crisis Group and think tanks like the Council on Foreign Relations, as well as data from conflict monitors such as the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). I also gathered data from reports and articles published by prominent Syrian newspapers that tracked the developments of the conflict daily, and conducted fieldwork even amidst the civil war.

In terms of primary sources, I conducted interviews with experts on the Syrian Civil War. I strategically selected interviewees who are leading specialists on the Syrian conflict, with particular expertise in the rebel groups that constitute the Syrian opposition movement. The participants represented three distinct categories of experts:

- **Academic Scholars:** Leading professors from prominent European universities whose research focuses specifically on armed non-state actors and the dynamics of rebel groups in Syria.
- **Institute Researchers:** Researchers affiliated with esteemed European policy institutes and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).
- **Fieldwork Specialists:** A subset of the selected experts who have conducted recent, extensive fieldwork in Syria, contributing to comprehensive reports and academic publications.

For data analysis, I triangulated the expert interviews, which served as my primary sources, with reports from European agencies, prominent European think tanks, and leading Syrian newspapers, which constituted my secondary sources. This approach allowed me to develop a comprehensive understanding of the MOC's contribution to the fall of the Assad regime.

The three groups I analyzed during my research were HTS, Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham. These groups, along with their numerous subgroups and factions, were key participants in the MOC and played a significant role in the defeat of the Assad regime (Al Jazeera 2025; Uddin 2024; EUAA 2025).

## **THEORY**

The focus of my research is the coalition of rebel groups that successfully defeated the Assad regime forces in December 2024, effectively ending the Syrian civil war and forcing the autocrat Assad to flee the country. I argue that the hegemonic and relational nature of the rebel coalition, organized around the MOC, was a key factor in the regime's downfall. Accordingly, my research concentrates on the MOC, specifically examining the factors that prompted the coalition's unification, the balance of power within the coalition, and the relationships among

the rebel groups involved. While my primary focus rests on the unification of the Syrian armed opposition, I acknowledge that the other reasons identified in the literature also contributed the regime's fall.

Under the leadership of HTS, the dominant rebel group within the Syrian national movement since 2019, the Syrian armed opposition successfully consolidated its ranks and unified its efforts against the regime rather than against itself. The hegemonic role of HTS enabled the movement to overcome years of fragmentation, impose strategic organization, and forge a cohesive military strategy under the MOC.

Nevertheless, the MOC was composed of numerous groups, most of which actively participated in the military operation that led to the Assad regime's downfall. The relational context among the groups motivated the smaller factions to set aside their own objectives of survival and self-empowerment, opting instead to robustly participate in the struggle against Assad's forces, despite the limited benefits that would arise from victory.

Without the unification of the Syrian opposition movement and the active involvement of smaller groups within the MOC, the Assad regime would likely not have fallen. Therefore, the hegemonic and relational nature of the Syrian opposition movement was a critical factor contributing directly to the regime's collapse.

To formulate my hypothesis, I draw on two frameworks that analyze the reasons and circumstances behind the formation of rebel group coalitions and their subsequent behaviors. Krause (2017), in his MST, suggests that in hegemonic national opposition movements there is a dominant group that possesses superior strength compared to other factions. This clear superiority discourages other groups from confronting the dominant one, as they recognize the futility of competition, resulting in minimal internal conflict within the opposition movement. Due to this dominance, hegemonic groups are more inclined to concentrate their resources on combating the regime rather than engaging in conflicts with other groups within the movement,

thereby increasing their chances of achieving victory. The hegemonic group establishes the rules within the movement, limiting the agency of smaller factions. Thus, the first causal step of my theory is as follows: if HTS was the hegemonic group within the MOC, holding superior strength compared to other significant groups, then the hegemonic role of HTS would have prevented the movement from succumbing to fragmentation and infighting, as the groups understood that competition was futile. This dynamic allowed the movement to focus on what Krause (2017) describes as a ‘war of movement’, a war against the regime. This first causal step explains how the hegemonic role of HTS facilitated the integration of the rebel groups into a single coalition and how it remained united between 2020 and 2024 without falling into fragmentation.

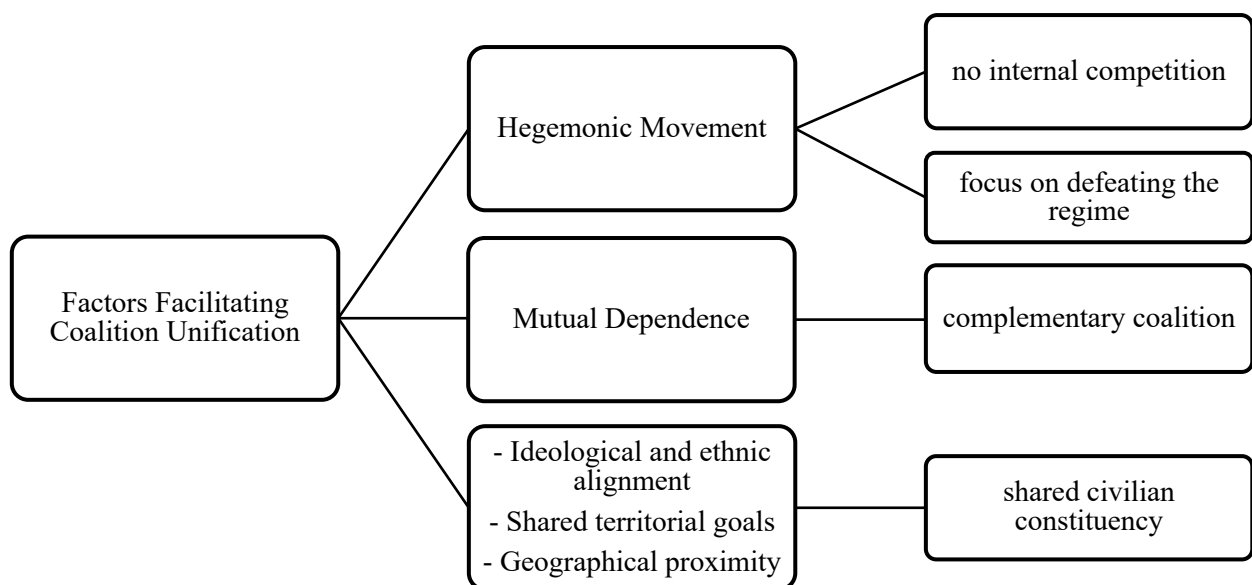
Krause's theory (2017) tends to overlook the role and actions of smaller groups within a hegemonic movement, characterizing them as merely passive and responsive to the directives of the dominant group. An examination of the military operation conducted by the MOC, which contributed to the Assad regime's downfall, reveals that HTS was the primary force driving this operation and played a crucial role in the coalition's overall efforts. However, other smaller groups in the coalition, such as Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham, not only participated in the military operation, temporarily setting aside their goals of survival and self-empowerment, but also made significant contributions to the operation that led to the conquest of Damascus (Al Jazeera, 2024). According to Krause (2017), these smaller groups should have refrained from participating, as it was the hegemonic group, HTS, that would reap the majority of the benefits from victory. Thus, Krause's MST is only partially applicable to the MOC coalition, as it fails to explain why smaller groups chose to engage in the military operation against Assad and why HTS would pursue coalition-building efforts. The second causal step is as follows: if smaller groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham had a role and agency within the MOC, then the hegemonic role of HTS alone was insufficient to explain the reasons behind the coalition's

creation and survival. The other groups within the MOC could have initially refused to join a coalition led by HTS or participate in the MOC's military operations, opting instead to concentrate solely on self-empowerment and the survival of their own group.

The MST's limitation prompts the introduction of the second theory. Topal (2025) presents what she terms the relational theory of alliance formation, which analyzes the reasons why certain groups collaborate and form alliances. Topal argues that the relational context between groups significantly influences the processes and motivations behind these alliances. If rebel groups share civilian constituencies, assessed through ideological and ethnic alignment, shared territorial goals and geographical proximity, they are more likely to establish integrated alliances. This second theory provides insight into why smaller groups within the MOC actively participated in the military operations that ultimately toppled the Assad regime, thereby making fundamental contributions to the effort. Considering that all the groups involved in the military operation leading to the fall of the Assad regime under the MOC originated from northwestern Syria, they cultivated strong relationships due to their shared civilian constituencies and alliances. This unity encouraged even the smaller groups within the alliance to set aside their individual goals of survival and self-empowerment to join the operation against the regime. The third and final causal step is as follows: if all three significant groups had ethnic and ideological alignments, shared territorial goals, and geographical proximity, this indicated that they shared a civilian constituency. As a result, to gain the support of the civilians, the groups developed similar military, social, economic, and governance structures. The similarity of these structures created incentives for cooperation and facilitated the integration of the groups into a single coalition.

The hegemonic role of HTS disincentivized competition within the Syrian opposition movement, allowing groups to concentrate on the fight against the regime. This focus led to the establishment of a unified central command military structure known as the al-Fath al-

Mubin military operations room, which was later rebranded in 2023 as the MOC. The groups recognized that only through coalition could they effectively challenge Assad's forces. The relational context in which these groups operated, along with their shared civilian constituency, created incentives for integration into a single coalition and reduced the likelihood of defection. This combination of factors enabled the MOC to form and maintain unity between 2020 and 2024, presenting a cohesive military front and strategy. By December 2024, they capitalized on the regime's vulnerabilities, ultimately leading to the downfall of the Assad regime.



*Table 1: Diagram illustrating the three causal steps in the research process*

## ANALYSIS

### The Hegemonic Role of HTS

In his MST, Krause (2017) distinguishes between a hegemonic national movement and a united/fragmented one. In the case of a hegemonic movement, there is a dominant group that holds superiority in terms of power and strength over other groups within the movement. This clear dominance prevents competition within the movement, as no other group can challenge the hegemonic group. Consequently, the movement can concentrate on a ‘war of movement’

against the state rather than engage in internal conflicts. On the other hand, a united/fragmented movement consists of two or more groups that possess similar levels of power and strength. This parity leads to competition among the groups as they strive for superiority within the movement. As a result, the movement tends to focus more on internal strife than on opposition against the state.

Analyzing the Syrian opposition movement revealed that HTS emerged as the dominant group from 2019 until the conquest of Damascus in December 2024. HTS asserted hegemony within the movement, establishing itself as the leading force in Idlib (Dr. Phillips, personal interview, October 20, 2025) (Dr. Corradi, personal interview, October 28, 2025). Dr. Topal argued that “HTS was not only the largest group, but it also proved to be the most powerful and effective” (Dr. Topal, personal interview, November 1, 2025). Starting in 2019, HTS gained effective control over much of the Idlib governorate and parts of Hama, Aleppo, and Latakia, enforcing its dominance over the factions and groups operating in these regions. The groups within Idlib were either directly affiliated with HTS or part of the al-Fath al-Mubin Operations Room, a central command structure that united Syrian opposition factions in Idlib under HTS leadership. From 2019 onward, all factions were linked to HTS and adhered to its commands, with no actions permitted without HTS approval. No group was able to challenge HTS's authority, which maintained complete control over the area (al-Sheikh, 2023).

There are three primary factors that have contributed to HTS's hegemony within the Syrian opposition movement: military victories over rivals during the period from 2017 to 2019, governance established in the governorate of Idlib through the Syrian Salvation Government, and a centralized organizational structure.

The two dominant armed groups within the Syrian opposition in Idlib between 2016 and 2017 were Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, the predecessor of HTS. While numerous smaller groups and factions existed, they were generally aligned with either Ahrar al-Sham or

Jabhat al-Nusra. Initially, these two groups cooperated to survive and face assaults from the regime, which was supported by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. However, starting in 2017, they began to diverge and engage in conflict with one another (Dr. Leenders, personal interview, November 10, 2025). This rivalry was rooted in Jabhat al-Nusra's ambition to unite all armed rebel factions within the Syrian opposition under its leadership and in the group that later became HTS, which Ahrar al-Sham resisted (Haenni and Drevon, 2025). The ensuing competition led to intense armed conflict, resulting in thousands of casualties for both groups. By 2019, HTS ultimately emerged victorious over Ahrar al-Sham and its allied factions, solidifying its dominance and hegemony in the governorate of Idlib and among the groups operating within it (Drevon, personal interview, November 5, 2025).

The second factor that solidified HTS's hegemony within the Syrian opposition movement was the governance it provided to the local population in the Idlib governorate through the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) since 2017. In that year, HTS established the SSG, a government made up of technocrats tasked with ruling Idlib and serving its residents (Sallam and Al Abdullah, 2023). While the SSG was created by HTS and its technocrats were associated with the group, the SSG managed to maintain a significant degree of operational independence from HTS (Drevon, personal interview, November 5, 2025). HTS's intent in providing governance through the SSG served two main objectives. First, it aimed to assert HTS's political authority over both the Idlib governorate and the various rebel groups and factions in the region. Second, it sought to gain political, social, and economic legitimacy in the eyes of the local population, as well as to increase public support for the SSG and HTS within the national and international community (Sallam and Al Abdullah, 2023).

HTS was the only group in the Syrian opposition movement that operated with financial independence. The other notable factions, Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham, relied on external donors, such as Turkey and Qatar, to finance their operations and pay their fighters.



HTS's economic autonomy stemmed from its governance through the SSG, which it administered in Idlib. The need to provide governance and take control of the economy in northwestern Syria arose when HTS severed its ties with al-Qaeda in 2017. Without financial support from al-Qaeda and lacking international donors, HTS seized control of the economic and governmental aspects of Idlib to fund its own operations (Drevon, personal interview, November 5, 2025).

Since 2017, HTS has taken control of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, the most important economic, humanitarian, and civilian entry point with Turkey. They imposed tariffs on commercial goods entering and leaving northwestern Syria and collected taxes on traffic passing through the crossing. HTS, then, gained control of most of Syria's northwestern border crossings with Turkey, the Syrian regime, and the Syrian National Army, an umbrella rebel group made up of various factions supported by Turkey, which controlled territories north of Idlib and Aleppo. HTS also seized control of the oil and gas sector in northwestern Syria by establishing the Watad Petroleum Company, which received exclusive rights to manage oil and gas derivatives from Turkey and supply them to the local population in Idlib (Al-Zaraee & Shaar, 2021).

In 2022, six new companies, affiliated with HTS and spun off from Watad Petroleum Company, obtained licenses to supply the region with oil and gas (al-Nobani, 2022). Furthermore, through the SSG, HTS established and took control of the banking and financial system in Idlib via the Sham Bank, in addition to providing telecommunications services to residents (Al-Zaraee & Shaar, 2021). HTS, through the SSG, also extended services like education, water, and electricity to the local population. For all these services, which are essential for governance, HTS, via the SSG, imposed taxes and levies on the populations (Dr. Phillips, personal interview, October 20, 2025).

By providing these governance services and imposing taxes, along with controlling border crossings, HTS not only achieved economic independence and self-sufficiency for its operations but also gained significant economic superiority over other rebel groups in Idlib (Drevon, personal interview, November 5, 2025). Through its governance initiatives in Idlib, which has a population of approximately 3 million (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2024), and through the SSG since 2017, HTS bolstered its legitimacy as more than just a rebel group focused on fighting the regime. HTS emerged as an actor concerned with the governance and socio-economic dynamics of the Idlib governorate, remaining consistent with its 2016 decision to sever ties with al-Qaeda and transform from a transnational jihadist group into an independent rebel faction within the Syrian opposition movement focused on overthrowing the Assad regime (Harmon Center for Contemporary Studies, 2025).

The governance HTS provided significantly enhanced its popular support, distinguishing it from other rebel groups involved in the Syrian opposition movement (Dr. Corradi, personal interview, October 28, 2025). HTS's effective governance in the Idlib governorate strengthened also its legitimacy and power relative to other rebel factions in the Syrian opposition movement. Its success in delivering governance and asserting authority, not only militarily but also politically, economically, and socially allowed HTS to achieve hegemony (Dr. Stutte, personal interview, October 28, 2025). No other group within the Syrian opposition demonstrated the capability or ambition to provide similar governance services (Drevon, personal interview, November 5, 2025). By managing governance in the Idlib governorate, HTS was able to realize four key advantages identified in rebel governance literature: “(1) extracting resources, (2) outbidding rival organizations, (3) gaining international legitimacy and support, and (4) strengthening the group’s bargaining position” (Florea and Malejacq, 2024, pg. 6).

The third factor that established HTS as the dominant group within the Syrian opposition movement was its centralized organizational structure. HTS's structure was vertical and hierarchical, led by a strong figure such as Ahmed al-Sharaa, known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani during his tenure in the opposition (Dr. Leenders, personal interview, November 10, 2025). This centralized and hierarchical model not only made HTS the most prepared and powerful military group but also the most efficient (Dr. Topal, personal interview, November 1, 2025). A former commander of the Free Syrian Army noted in a statement to the Financial Times that when they faced HTS in 2013 (then known as Jabhat al-Nusra), HTS fighters conducted flawless operations and achieved their objectives swiftly (Jalabi, 2025). The hierarchical structure of HTS facilitated clear strategic planning and vision across the political, military, economic, and social sectors. In contrast other significant groups within the Syrian opposition, such as Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham, were characterized by a horizontal and disunited structure, comprising small local armed rebel groups that occasionally resisted orders from the central command (Dr. Leenders, personal interview, November 10, 2025). The leadership of Ahrar al-Sham, for instance, exerted only partial control over the group's activities, relying heavily on local units and branches (Leenders, 2022, indirect quote from an expert witness report). Additionally, Ahrar al-Sham had a shifting leadership elected by a Shura Council, as its members sought to maintain a dynamic and responsive movement (Dr. Leenders, 2022, indirect quote from an expert witness report). In 2019, in a bid to counter the military successes of HTS, Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham united to form the National Liberation Front (NLF) and became part of the Syrian National Army framework, an alliance of Syrian rebel groups backed by Turkey. This merger led to further fragmentation among the two groups and their local factions, resulting in a more dispersed leadership (Drevon, personal interview, November 5, 2025).

The cohesive, centralized, and hierarchical structure of HTS contrasted sharply with the fragmented organization of Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham, enabling HTS to gain more dominance within the Syrian opposition movement and achieve hegemony. From 2019, when HTS defeated Ahrar al-Sham and established its authority throughout the Idlib governorate, until December 2024, when the Assad regime was overthrown, there was a gradual unification of the forces and efforts of the rebel groups in the Syrian opposition movement. HTS, utilizing its superior economic resources derived from governance functions to finance military activities and support its own soldiers, continued to strengthen its dominant position within the opposition movement by attracting rebel fighters and factions to join its ranks. As the hegemonic group, HTS became a formidable force that other groups and factions had to reckon with in some capacity (Drevon, personal interview, November 5, 2025).

In 2020, at HTS's initiative, the three primary groups, HTS, Ahrar al-Sham, and Faylaq al-Sham, decided to create al-Fath al-Mubin, a military operations room designed to unify all Syrian opposition factions in Idlib under a single centralized command structure (which rebranded itself as the MOC in 2023). Each brigade and faction was assigned a geographical area and required to follow orders from the central command, ensuring that no group could initiate military operations without this consent. Given that the operations room was established by the most powerful groups within the opposition, all other smaller factions in Idlib either joined the al-Fath al-Mubin military operations room or adhered to its decisions (Drevon, personal interview, November 5, 2025).

It was HTS's hegemonic role that enabled the unification of the rebel groups in the Syrian opposition movement operating in Idlib under the command structure of the al-Fath al-Mubin military operations room. The dominance and clear superiority exhibited by HTS in military, political, social, and economic spheres through governance via the SSG, not only disincentivized competition within the movement, but also compelled other rebel groups to

align under its leadership and collaborate in the fight against the regime, as none of these groups could match or challenge HTS's superiority. Without HTS's hegemonic role, the Syrian opposition movement would likely have remained fragmented, as it has since the onset of the Syrian civil war.

### **A Complementary Coalition**

The position of hegemony that HTS held within the Syrian opposition movement since 2019 wasn't the only factor contributing to the achievement of strategic victory against the regime, as predicted by Krause's MST. HTS alone could not have defeated the Assad regime; it required the support of other groups within the opposition movement, each of which possessed considerable agency within the MOC. HTS's hegemony facilitated the unification of the movement under a single central military command. This resulted in a mutually beneficial relationship between the hegemon HTS and other groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham. Initially, these three groups united to survive the Assad regime's assaults and sustain the Syrian opposition. They then focused on the aspects that worked well for each group in Idlib, with HTS managing governance while the other groups provided military and manpower support. Through this collaboration, they solidified their unification, became complementary to each other within the movement, and created favorable conditions to topple the Assad regime.

The hegemony of HTS did not enhance the likelihood of the Syrian opposition movement achieving victory; on the contrary, it almost triggered the opposite reaction. After HTS's military victory over Ahrar al-Sham in January 2019, the Assad regime launched an offensive in the spring of 2020 against territories controlled by groups within the Syrian opposition movement in Idlib and northern Aleppo, supported by Russian airstrikes. As a result of this offensive, HTS and its allied groups lost 40% of the territories they had controlled

(Haenni and Drevon, 2025, p. 75-76). Many diplomats and experts believed that following Assad's advance, the opposition movement would capitulate definitively to Assad's forces within a few months to a couple of years; it seemed that the end was imminent (Drevon, personal interview, November 5, 2025).

Not only did HTS lack the military strength to topple the Assad regime on its own, but it also struggled to ensure its survival against regime forces. Although HTS achieved military victory over Ahrar al-Sham in 2019 and secured a dominant position within the Syrian opposition movement, it still required the support of Ahrar al-Sham and other rebel groups (Drevon, personal interview, November 5, 2025). Prior to HTS's rise to dominance, Ahrar al-Sham was one of the most influential groups within the opposition (Dr. Topal, personal interview, November 1, 2025). In 2019, the number of fighters on each side, HTS and the NLF (which included both Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham), was quite balanced and similar, with both having fewer than 10,000 fighters. Groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, held a significant presence in the Idlib area, had governance systems in place, and managed the political and social aspects of civilian life in their territories. These factors provided them with considerable agency. Given the balance between the opposing forces, HTS recognized that, despite its military victory due to better and more efficient training of its armed forces, it could not simply demand that other groups dissolve and integrate into HTS's ranks. Such a demand would likely be met with refusal, as it would be perceived as humiliating, and the NLF had enough strength to resist. Additionally, HTS acknowledged that it lacked the numbers to defend itself against the regime independently, just as the NLF was also unable to do so on its own. Both sides understood that continuing to operate in a fragmented manner would risk definitive defeat by the regime (Drevon, personal interview, November 5, 2025).

The solution was to forge a coalition where various groups could play complementary roles, thereby developing an effective alliance capable of opposing the Assad regime. Ahrar al-

Sham and Faylaq al-Sham, renounced all social and political aspects of governance in the areas under their control, delegating these responsibilities to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) through the Syrian Salvation Government. This allowed Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham to concentrate solely on military operations. At that point, the factions combined their military efforts within the al-Fath al-Mubin operations room, establishing a centralized command to manage military operations across all groups active in Idlib (Drevon, personal interview, November 5, 2025). Essentially factions within the Syrian opposition movement entered a mutually beneficial arrangement, with HTS overseeing both governance and military functions, while groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham provided manpower and military support (Dr. Phillips, personal interview, October 20, 2025).

As evidence of this unification, the Syrian Salvation Government and various rebel groups decided to establish the Military College in 2021. This institution aimed to provide all armed forces within the opposition with uniform military training, ultimately uniting their efforts and offering modern and efficient military instruction to professionalize the rebel forces (Levant24, 2021). HTS played a pivotal role in both the establishment of the college and in providing essential training expertise to the armed forces of the rebel groups. This further highlighted its superiority in military efficiency and preparedness (Dr. Carenzi, personal interview, October 6, 2025). The effectiveness displayed by these rebel groups during the December 2024 offensive, enabling them to seize control of the capital in under ten days, was a direct outcome of the joint military training received since 2021 (Dr. Corradi, personal interview, October 28, 2025).

Although HTS held a hegemonic position within the Syrian opposition movement, it could not confront the Assad regime independently and relied on the military support of groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham, which acknowledged HTS's superiority. This created

a shared desire to unite into a complementary coalition, ultimately aimed at toppling the Assad regime.

### **The Relational Logic Behind the Alliance**

There is a third step that facilitated the unification of the Syrian opposition movement within the al-Fath al-Mubin military operations room. Although both sides, HTS on one side and Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham on the other, needed each other to confront the regime, their alliance was not immediately apparent. The Syrian opposition movement had remained fragmented since the onset of the civil war. While HTS emerged as the dominant group, Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham retained significant agency and could have opted not to join the alliance. The decision of these three groups to join forces against the regime was influenced by their shared ideological and ethnic background, geographical proximity, and common territorial goals, particularly from 2019 onward. Without these shared factors, fragmentation would likely have persisted.

In discussing this third step, I refer to Topal's (2025) relational theory of rebel alliance formation. The author argues that alliances between rebel groups are not merely opportunistic or transactional; they also depend on the relational context in which these groups operate. Topal posits that rebel groups embedded within the same civilian constituencies and seeking support from the same population are more likely to form alliances with each other. To measure overlapping civilian support, the author outlines four indicators: common ethnicity, shared ideology, collective territorial goals, and mutual operational fields.

Topal (2025) states that rebel groups share the same ideology when they possess a unified vision for the country's future and a similar post-conflict framework. This alignment fosters the development of comparable organizational structures across social, political, and particularly military domains. Consequently, the groups adopt parallel military strategies and



utilize similar equipment. The reason for this is that rebel groups aim to extract resources, such as funding and recruits, from the same civilian population. Having similar internal structures facilitates the formation of strategic alliances, as the integration of these comparable frameworks becomes more manageable.

HTS, originally known as Jabhat al-Nusra, was established in 2013 as an extreme Salafist-jihadist group first allied with the Islamic State and later with al-Qaeda.

“Ideologically, Jabhat al-Nusra followed the so-called *manhaj al-haq* (the "true" or "pure" method) of al-Qaeda. Central to this is the creation, by means of an armed struggle or jihad, of an 'Islamic state', typified by the sovereignty of God and application of Islamic law, the Shari'a. All nation-states that are not based on the strict observance of the Shari'a are seen as illegitimate. Muslims who neglect their individual duty of jihad are considered apostates; an offense that in principle deserves the death penalty. More specifically, for Jabhat al-Nusra, the ultimate goal was to oust the Assad regime in order to pave the way for the establishment of an Islamic state and the strict adherence to the Shari'a in Syria.” (Dr. Leenders, 2021b, direct quote from an expert witness report).

After cutting ties with al-Qaeda in 2016 and rebranding as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the group completely renounced al-Qaeda's extremist practices and global aspirations. Instead, it focused on a more moderate Islamic ideology centered on Syrian nationalism and the struggle against the Assad regime (Ajjoub, 2025).

Ahrar al-Sham followed a similar trajectory to that of HTS. Established in 2011 as a radical Islamist movement with jihadist-Salafist ideas, Ahrar al-Sham was initially allied with al-Qaeda, adhering to its principles. The group sought to overthrow the Assad regime and establish an Islamic state in Syria governed by Sharia law, which it intended to achieve through jihad (Dr. Leenders, 2021, indirect quote from an expert witness report). From 2016 onwards, Ahrar al-Sham evolved into a broad Islamist Syrian national group focused on the needs of the Syrian people, renouncing the global ambitions of al-Qaeda. Both HTS and Ahrar al-Sham took steps toward a more moderate Islamist nationalism centered on Syria, responding to the demands of the populations they governed to garner greater support and alignment (Dr. Leenders, 2022, indirect quote from an expert witness report). Since its inception in 2014,

Faylaq al-Sham maintained a more ideologically moderate stance, operating as a moderately Islamist rebel group aimed at toppling the Assad regime (Dr. Leenders, 2021b, indirect quote from an expert witness report). Therefore, an ideological alignment among the three groups emerged from 2017 onwards.

Regarding the concept of shared ethnic background, Topal (2025) defines common ethnicity as occurring “when the vast majority of their members come from the same ethnic community with ethnonationalist interests [...] allied groups will have an overlap in ethnicity when sharing similar identity-based interests and compositions” (p. 282). Not all members and fighters within the MOC shared the same ethnic background: the group included Syrian Turkmens, foreign fighters, and some Kurdish fighters (Dr. Carenzi, personal interview, October 6, 2025). However, the vast majority (90%) belonged to the Arab ethnic group, specifically Sunni Arabs (Drevon, personal interview, November 5, 2025). Additionally, most of the population in the Idlib governorate is also largely Arab, particularly Sunni Arab (European Asylum Support Office, 2021). When rebel groups and their supporting populations share a common ethnicity, this strengthens their collective action due to shared grievances and a strong sense of group identity (Topal, 2025).

The ethnic and ideological cohesion among the three groups since 2017 has facilitated their integration into the coalition that became the al-Fath al-Mubin military operations room in 2020. The ideological alignment has enabled a strong alliance, unifying different ethnic groups within the same coalition and preventing ethnic differences from leading to fragmentation.

Topal's (2025) third and fourth parameters address geographical proximity and territorial goals. Different rebel groups demonstrate geographical proximity when they conduct their primary operations, such as taking shelter, attacking state forces, and training, in the same areas. Their territorial goals may include asserting sovereignty over specific areas or attempting

to seize control of the entire country to overthrow the government. In situations, as in the case of the HTS, Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham, where rebel groups rely on civilian funding as their primary source of support, due to a lack of exploitable natural resources, they tend to develop similar governance structures and provide comparable basic services to the population. This approach is essential for gaining support and legitimacy from the same civilian population, which in turn asserts their authority over the area. Since they depend on the populations for funding, these rebel groups are highly responsive to civilian needs; consequently, their similar governance styles facilitate their alliance, making integration of services more straightforward (Topal, 2025).

Reports from the European Union Agency for Asylum detail the activities of HTS, Faylaq al-Sham, and Ahrar al-Sham in the governorates of Idlib, Hama, Latakia, and western Aleppo (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2023; European Union Agency for Asylum, 2024). However since 2017, all three groups primarily operated in the Idlib governorate (Drevon, personal interview, November 5, 2025), engaging in armed clashes against pro-government forces in Latakia, Hama, and western Aleppo only as needed (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2023; European Union Agency for Asylum, 2024).

In terms of territorial goals, the three groups initially sought to assert sovereignty and control over the Idlib governorate, which spurred their involvement in the armed conflict starting in 2017 (Haenni and Drevon, 2025, p. 71-72). After HTS emerged victorious over the other two groups in 2019, their territorial goals shifted. Recognizing HTS as the dominant force in Idlib, the groups redirected their focus toward combating the regime and the potential overthrow of Assad. Although the military operation in November 2024 started with the aim of capturing only the governorate of Aleppo and expanding the MOC's territorial reach, the MOC's overarching goal since its formation has been national control (Drevon, personal interview, November 5, 2025).

The ethnic and ideological alignment, the shared territorial goals, and the geographic proximity of HTS, Ahrar al-Sham, and Faylaq al-Sham, especially following HTS's military victory over the other two groups in 2019, significantly facilitated the integration of their governance, military, political, and social structures into what became the al-Fath al-Mubin military operations room, rebranded in 2023 as the MOC.

## **CONCLUSION**

Without the unification of rebel groups within the Syrian opposition movement into a single, coordinated military operational structure, the Syrian regime would not have fallen. My research makes a significant contribution to the literature on the fall of the Assad regime by analyzing an aspect that remains understudied: the unification of Syrian rebel groups into the MOC. Through a process-tracing approach, I first focused on the balance of power within the MOC, drawing on Krause's (2017) Movement Structure Theory, and then examined inter-group relations within the MOC using Topal's (2025) relational theory. The hegemonic role of HTS made competition within the Syrian opposition movement unnecessary, enabling the groups to concentrate on fighting the regime rather than each other. The shared civilian constituency where these groups operated, along with their relationships and similarities, created incentives for cooperation. This combination of factors facilitated the formation and unity of the MOC between 2020 and 2024, allowing the groups to present a cohesive front. In December 2024, they capitalized on the vulnerabilities of state forces and successfully toppled the Assad regime in a military operation that lasted just 10 days.

As outlined in the introduction, my research presents three main contributions. The first is that it enhances the literature on the fall of the Assad regime by understanding the reasons and circumstances that led to the unification of the MOC and the crucial role that this unification played in the fall of the Assad regime. However, this first contribution also has

limitations that future studies could address, particularly through fieldwork. To gain a better understanding of the relationships and interactions among the groups, it would be valuable to interview leaders or members of HTS, Ahrar al-Sham, and Faylaq al-Sham directly to explore any agreements that existed during the formation of the al-Fath al-Mubin operations room. Furthermore, as Dr. Phillips noted in our interview, it would be interesting to investigate the extent of Turkey's involvement, not only in the operation that resulted in the fall of the Assad regime but also during the years when the MOC was conducting operations in Idlib, and whether there was any agreement in place between Turkey and the MOC. Conversely, as highlighted by Dr. Leenders during our conversation, another area for further research would be to engage with former members of Assad's military or paramilitary forces. Interviewing these individuals could shed light on what factors contributed to their inability to effectively counter the MOC offensive.

The second contribution of my research is its potential to inform the broader comparative analyses. The findings can be generalized to other cases of rebel groups coalitions and civil wars, offering a strong foundation for cross-case comparisons. In this regard, future research could compare the unification of the MOC and the military operation that led to the fall of the Assad regime with the Taliban's rise to power and takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. Such a comparison could reveal potential similarities between the two cases, reinforcing the findings and further enriching the literature on rebel group coalitions and civil war dynamics.

The third contribution of this thesis is directed toward policymakers and scholars. By analyzing the conditions that enabled the unification of Syrian rebel groups within the MOC, my research can help anticipate possible scenarios in civil wars involving either unified rebel groups coalitions or fragmented opposition forces. Furthermore, my study provides a clear picture of the factors that contributed to the MOC's success, offering valuable insights for

developing strategies to engage with unified rebel coalitions as well as with isolated groups whose fragmentation shapes the dynamics of the conflict.

## ENDNOTES

Drevon, Jerome. Senior analyst on Jihad in Modern Conflict at the International Crisis Group.

The interview was conducted on November 5, 2025.

Dr. Christopher Phillips, Professor of International Relations at Queen Mary University of London. The interview was conducted on October 20, 2025.

Dr. Corey Stutte, CEO of the geopolitical company GeoPioneer. The interview was conducted on October 28, 2025.

Dr. Edoardo Corradi, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Bologna. The interview was conducted on October 28, 2025.

Dr. Reinoud Leenders, Reader in International Politics and Middle East Studies at King's College London. The interview was conducted on November 10, 2025. During the same conversation, Dr. Leenders also provided the three expert witness reports cited in the reference list.

Dr. Sedef Topal, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Ripon College. The interview was conducted on November 1, 2025.

Dr. Silvia Carenzi, researcher specializing in military affairs, armed groups, and the dynamics of peace and conflict in Syria. The interview was conducted on October 6, 2025.

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