

# FROM PERSECUTION TO 'PROTECTION'

## Christian and Druze communities in Idleb

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Thematic report



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## Key takeaways

- There is evidence that Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and the Syrian Salvation Government are attempting to improve their discourse and relationship with the Christian and Druze communities in Idlib governorate.
- The leader and commander of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, has for the past few years been working to improve the image of both himself and his terrorist-designated group; this new pivot towards apparent religious tolerance looks to be part of these efforts.
- HTS's incremental shift towards pragmatism is unlikely to drastically change the views of the international community in relation to the group's legitimacy, and it could affect its internal legitimacy among allied Islamist armed groups and its local support base.
- Druze communities under SSG control experienced higher growth in humanitarian need from 2020 to 2022 for basic services, education, NFI, and shelter than surrounding majority communities.
- The confiscation of property, either from religious minority groups, or dissenters, was common throughout the conflict and considered 'spoils of war'. Recently however, reports show that some attempts are being made to return property to its owners.
- Although the actions towards religious tolerance from HTS appear to be part of a wider public relations strategy, they could have positive effects on minorities. The possibility of obtaining more religious freedom to practice their rites is a good thing, as is reclaiming possession of their property.
- There is doubt over whether HTS' apparent pivot towards tolerance is genuine; the extent to which HTS can exercise control over radical elements is dubious, with major violations committed by more allies and former allies, the Turkistan Islamic Party and the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Hurras ad-Din

# Introduction

The establishment of control of the armed group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)<sup>1</sup> and the installation of its administrative arm, the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), in Idleb in 2017, introduced changes which have broadly shaped the overall landscape of the governorate. HTS, a group with roots in and significant support based on Islamic extremism, remains committed to opposing Damascus rule, and has become a key governing power in northwest Syria.

HTS is currently led by Abu Mohammad Al-Jolani, an ex-member of the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat An-Nusra; the group officially branched out from the terrorist-designated Al-Qaeda in 2016 (there were subsequent reincarnations, the final of which was a consolidation of groups into HTS). Jolani's continued claims to have cut ties with Al-Qaeda are representative of his strategy to gain legitimacy as a governing power, and distance the group from the designation of terrorists.

HTS' quest to present legitimacy, both domestically and in the eyes of the international community, has begun to favor pragmatism over religious ideology in governance. An essential pillar of this pragmatism, as will be discussed, is the relationship between HTS and religious minorities, namely the Christian and Druze communities living in Idleb. Specifically focusing on these relationships, the HAT retraces the development of the SSG's and HTS' discourse, policy, and actions towards these communities, in matters related to freedom of religious expression, security and governance, and humanitarian aid; here, particular attention is paid to the changes in religious minority housing, land and property issues, as well as comparisons in humanitarian need relative to the evolution of HTS status in the northwest.

The dynamics of this relationship are described and analyzed with the following variables in mind: previous policies by different actors towards religious minorities, HTS's motives for policy changes, and the impact of these changes on HTS' external and internal legitimacy.<sup>2</sup>



*Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, leader of the main opposition armed group in Idleb, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, meets with Druze community leaders while inaugurating a water well in June 2022. Source: Amjaad media outlet*

1 Because of their rejection of the Astana negotiations, five factions merged under the name of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Assembly for the Liberation of the Levant): Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki, Liwa al-Haqq, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, and Jaysh al-Sunna.

2 External legitimacy refers to legitimacy and recognition by outside actors, mainly the international community. Internal legitimacy refers to legitimacy endowed from within HTS's ranks and its local support base.

# Background

Before 2011, demographics in Idlib governorate were religiously and culturally diverse, reflecting the makeup of Syria as a whole. The Sunni-majority governorate has historically also been home to Druze, Christian, and Shia communities, spread throughout the main cities and several villages in northern and western Idlib. Before 2011, minorities were able to practice their religion freely, and lived among the Muslim majority. Shia communities were predominantly concentrated in two areas: Kafraya Maaret Tamsrin subdistrict and Foua Bennsh subdistrict, north of Idlib city. Shia residents in these locations [were evacuated](#) in July 2018, a measure agreed in the 'Four Towns Agreement.'<sup>3</sup> This is commonly understood to be the last of the Shia population in Idlib.

After 2011, the situation became increasingly tense; the Syrian government ramped up efforts to recruit Shia, Christian and Druze individuals to fight during the early days of the conflict. Many Shia fought for the government; Christian and Druze communities largely preferred to remain neutral in Idlib, with [some exceptions](#). Some Druze supported the Syrian government, meaning they had to flee from opposition forces, while others participated in demonstrations against the Syrian government at first, and then returned to neutrality.

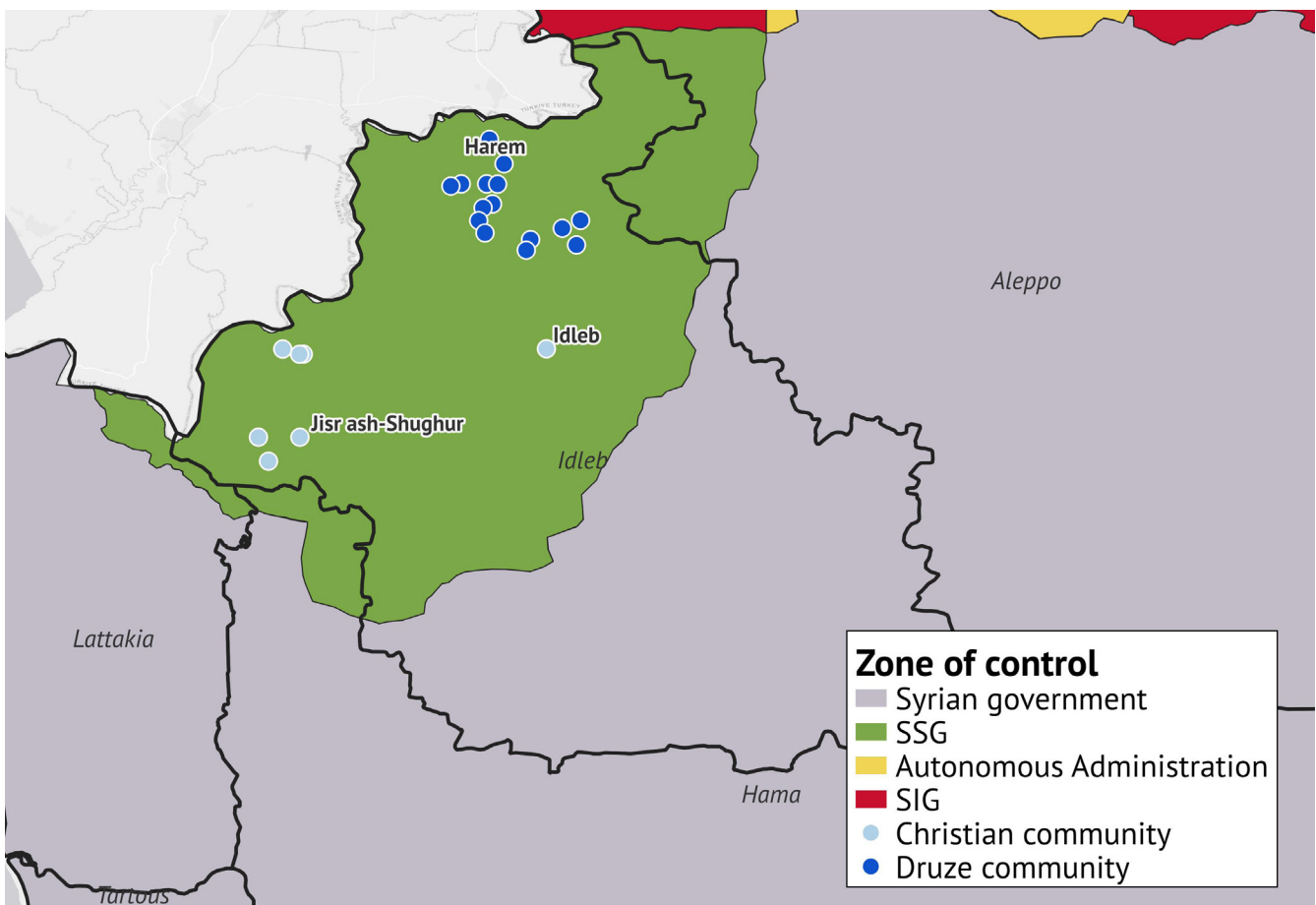


Figure 1. Druze and Christian communities under SSG control in northwest Syria. (Source: HAT Syria)

<sup>3</sup> The Four Towns agreement was the result of discussions, held under the supervision of Russia, Iran and Turkey, between the Syrian government and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly Jabhat An-Nusra). According to the agreement, approximately 7,000 people were evacuated from the two villages, while combatants and civilians detained by Jabhat Fateh al-Sham were released in exchange for the release of 1,500 people from government prisons, in addition to the evacuation of 8,000 civilians and combatants from Madaya and Az-Zabadani, Az-Zabadani subdistrict in Rural Damascus to Idlib.

## *Christians in Idleb*

Approximately [10,000 Christians](#) lived in Idleb before 2011, with about 1,300 [in Idleb city](#), and the rest spread throughout the city of Jisr Ash-Shughur and the villages of Jdidet Eljisir, Yaqubiyyeh, Qanniyeh, Ghassaniyeh and Halluz (Jisr Ash-Shughur subdistrict).<sup>4</sup> After 2011, the majority of Christians began to leave the governorate, with an estimated 200 remaining today. The vast majority of Christians were displaced from Idleb at different periods. Their displacement began from Jisr al-Shughur and the nearby villages in 2012, as a result of harassment or fear of harassment from extremist Islamic groups. They were also completely displaced from the city of Idleb after the opposition took control of it in March 2015. Displaced Christians headed to government-held areas (Latakia, Aleppo and Damascus) while others sought asylum in Europe, some through Turkey.

Despite the small number of Christians remaining, they were continuously harassed during the control of Jabhat An-Nusra (later HTS). Christians were prevented from practicing their religious rites in public, and the lands and homes of Christians who were displaced were confiscated by what was then called the Spoils Committee (set up to oversee war-time property and assets belonging to dissenting groups, including Christians, Druze and Shias, and government supporters.) It has been reported that Christians who remained were at risk of being kidnapped for ransom, or killed; six cases have been recorded in the last two years, the most recent of which was the kidnap, rape and murder of a Christian woman from the town of Yaqubiyyeh – her body was found in July 2019, near the Jdidet Eljisir village.

## *Druze in Idleb*

There were also approximately 30,000 Druze living in the areas of Jabal al-Summaq, north of Idleb, in several villages: Banabel, Qalb Lozeh, Bashandaltni, Kafr Kila, Abarita, Jadeen, Bshendlaya, Kafr Mars, Taltita, Helleh, Kuku, Dweir, Arshen and Kafr Bani (Kafr Takharim subdistrict), and Kaftin, Beeret Kaftin and Maaret Elekhwan (Maaret Tamsrin subdistrict). Half of the Druze population was displaced from Idleb governorate from 2012 to 2015, and half of the Druze – about 15,000 people – remained in their villages, which also hosted IDPs from different Syrian regions.

After the expansion of Jabhat An-Nusra control in Idleb in 2014, the Druze were prohibited from carrying weapons and practicing their religious rites. Jabhat An-Nusra appointed Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Tunisi as Emir of the region; Tunisi gave the remaining Druze one year to declare their conversion to Islam, convert their places of worship to mosques, and teach their children Islamic practices, or they would be expelled.<sup>5</sup> Then, in June 2015, Druze residents of Qalb Lozeh were victims of a deadly [massacre](#) in the area. More than 20 Druze civilians were killed by Jabhat An-Nusra, headed by Tunisi.<sup>6</sup> Druze persecution has also extended to kidnapping; more than [53 Druze citizens were kidnapped](#) from the beginning of 2012 to August 2022, by multiple actors, including ISIS, HTS, and other extremist groups. They have also continuously been subjected to harassment and threats.

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4 Christians in Jisr Ash-Shughur and Qanniyeh lived with residents of other religions, while the rest of the villages were completely Christian.

5 Jabhat An-Nusra considered the Druze as non-Muslims.

6 Jabhat An-Nusra issued a [statement](#) denouncing the massacre and promising to hold those responsible accountable, while Tunisi defected from the group after disengaging from Al-Qaeda in 2016, and HTS killed him in April 2021.

## Minority groups in Idleb in 2022



*Christians celebrating the birthday of Saint Anna at Yaqubiyyeh Church in Idleb, [Syria TV](#)*

As described, Christian and Druze populations in Idleb have been victims of targeted persecution from the beginning of the Syrian conflict. However, since about 2020, there have been small shifts in how they are treated. In recent years, following the creation of the SSG, local councils were formed in villages with Druze and Christian minorities. The Druze community, in specific villages where they have a large minority, along with representatives of the IDPs, run these councils, which in turn coordinate with the SSG. These councils were formed either by elections or by consensus, and Druze village councils were unified into

one council under the SSG. Christian participation in local councils is weak, due to their low numbers, and a preference not to have official relations with opposition bodies; these councils are managed by the IDPs in the villages. In general, these councils have a good reputation among the residents and coordinate with the SSG Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs, for example, to obtain approvals for NGOs to work in the villages. The councils however have limited power to enact or change policy, which limits their effectiveness.

Additionally, HTS control has become more institutionalized, with the renaming of the Spoils Committee to the Department of Housing, and other renaming exercises to remove associations with religious extremism, and to create a veneer of officialdom in the SSG – although the veneer is thin. Centralized power remains with Jolani, as do policy approval and implementation.

Then, in late August 2022, images of Christian families [celebrating](#) the birthday of Saint Anna circulated throughout local and social media. The families celebrated by holding a mass at the Yaqubiyyeh Church, one of the oldest and largest Armenian churches in the area, located in Jisr ash-Shughur district, in the western Idleb countryside. The celebration received widespread media attention, both because of its open and public manner, and because the HTS-affiliated General Security branch closely monitored and provided [security](#) for the event – an unusual show of support for a Christian event.

The SSG-affiliated Administration of Jisr ash-Shughur district, part of the Management of the Liberated Areas,<sup>7</sup> issued a [statement](#) on 3 September, indicating that the SSG “considers the residents of these towns and villages [the Christian communities] as a part of the social fabric, who enjoy their rights to live in their residences and carry on their work and daily activities in a safe manner; additionally, they have responsibilities, which entail refraining from siding with or supporting the Syrian government and adhering to the general policies of the liberated areas.” In addition to providing security, before the celebrations took place, HTS also took charge of [ousting](#) combatants affiliated with the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), known for harassing minority religions, from the Christian areas.

<sup>7</sup> During the second half of 2020, HTS [formed](#) what is known as the Administration of the Liberated Areas, whereby territories under its control were divided into eight regions, each assigned a district administration. Reportedly, authority over the management of these districts was granted to figures that enjoy popular support, in contrast with HTS's prior policy of assigning positions of power to loyalists regardless of popular approval. The Druze communities in Jabal al Summaq fall under the jurisdiction of the Harem District Administration, while the Christian communities in western rural Idleb are governed under the Jisr ash-Shughur District Administration.

The statement by the Jisr ash-Shughur Administration illustrates two potential shifts in HTS policy towards religious minorities: As seen, there have been improvements to the status and freedoms of religious minorities (albeit incremental and perhaps anecdotal), in the latter half of 2022. Also, the shift seems central to HTS' interests to exercise close control over the implementation of policies related to minorities, especially as it strives to balance the potential for more inclusive policies, its ideologically conservative support and power base, and its external image for international actors. The August celebration in Yaqubiyeh is just part of a series of steps taken by HTS to improve its relationship with religious minorities, namely the Christian and Druze communities, in matters related to religious freedom, governance and service provision, humanitarian aid provision, and housing, land and property (HLP) rights.

Similarly, Jolani [visited](#) the Druze communities in Jabal al Summaq on 9 June, where he met with local figures and inaugurated a water well project in the area – although the community largely funded the well themselves. The well is an important landmark for reconstruction, [servicing](#) around 6,000 beneficiaries in the localities of Banabel, Qalb Lozeh, Kafr Kila, Bshendlaya, and Bshandalanti. During the meeting, the Druze locals expressed their [need](#) for a healthcare facility, stating that there is a hospital in the town of Tal-tita that needs to be reactivated (this is yet to happen). Druze leaders also acknowledged that complaints and violations have been decreasing, although there are several pending issues, primarily related to HLP violations, that still need to be addressed.

Subsequent [meetings](#) with community leaders from Ariha and Jabal al Zawiya in March 2022, followed by a [visit](#) to IDPs west of Sarmada in July, echo the ongoing efforts by Jolani to present HTS as an actor that is able to maneuver within society, rather than dictate over it. HTS' rise to dominance in Idleb governorate is based on a history of heavy conflict with other local armed opposition groups; heavy-handed implementation of restrictive policies and religious ideology have led to the confiscation of property, as well as interference in the provision of humanitarian aid, which has affected minorities differently. Christians, who have largely fled, have found their homes expropriated, while the larger population of Druze have greater need for humanitarian assistance than other majority groups.

## *HLP rights*

HLP-related issues involving residential properties and agricultural land, spearheaded by the previously named Spoils Committee, have constituted a major source of grievance for minority communities, including Druze and Christian, in Idleb governorate. According to Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), a local human rights advocacy organization, HTS [confiscated](#) approximately 550 houses and commercial stores owned by Christian families between late 2018 and October 2019 in Idleb city, justifying the decision by the claim that the families left the city. Roughly during the same period, HTS, Hurras Ad-Din, and the TIP reportedly [confiscated](#) around 750 properties in Jisr ash-Shughur countryside, including residential homes and agricultural land, most of which was owned by Christians.

There are no accurate statistics regarding HLP-related issues targeting the Druze communities of Jabal al Summaq; according to the Syria Report,<sup>8</sup> the SSG has been working on [returning](#) confiscated properties, both houses and lands, either to their direct owners or to their first-degree relatives. However, generally speaking, HLP-related issues in Jabal al-Summaq area seem to be less frequent and organized than those targeting Christian communities in Idleb and Jisr ash-Shughur. A significant number of HLP-related issues in Jabal al Summaq are taking place in a [decentralized manner](#), without the knowledge of HTS leadership, and confiscated properties are being returned once complaints are filed. It was noted that HTS and the SSG have been very cautious with HLP rights in Jabal al-Summaq as part of attempting to make

amends with the Druze community following the 2015 Qalb Lozeh massacre, in which 20 people were killed by members of Jabhat An-Nusra (described above).

HTS has led the charge in confiscating properties since taking control of Idleb governorate and controlling all service-related infrastructure. Some Christian houses were given to combatants from different factions, including foreign combatants from the TIP. Churches were converted into headquarters for armed groups, while others were damaged by the Syrian government (at least ten out of twelve churches throughout Idleb). In 2018, the SSG [canceled any](#) authority given by displaced Christians to individuals to manage their properties, and requested the presence of the property owner to confirm ownership, or risk it being confiscated. The SSG also demanded that anyone who occupied property owned by Christians who had left the province to vacate immediately, or pledge to pay a monthly tax on the property. According to the decision, the SSG then returned some lands and properties to their Christian owners in Idleb, but forced them to sign contracts to allow them to cultivate their land; the contracts stipulated that HTS assumed 60% of agricultural output.<sup>9</sup> Seizure of religious minority-owned property was not limited to residential and agricultural property; in November 2018, HTS [seized](#) three markets in Idleb city center, where Christian merchants have historically owned and operated several stores and warehouses.

## *Aid provision*

An important indicator of whether HTS and SSG's apparent pivot towards more inclusive policy is genuine can be observed through recent projects related to service and aid provision in Christian and Druze communities. In saying minorities are essential to society in Idleb, Jolani has also promised to improve services in areas where they live – stating that previous poor service provision was due to the “state of war” in the governorate. Within Syria, HAT has no record of an organization being prevented from accessing or implementing projects in areas with minority populations. Many NGOs operating in Idleb identify, but do not specifically earmark, Christian and Druze areas for aid provision and programming, along with other IDPs and Sunni Muslim residents. Christians, and some Druze residents are hesitant to claim that aid provision and NGO programming does not reach them, as they point out that many IDPs are in greater need, and more likely recipients of support. However, there is a general understanding that conditions in Idleb are poor, which the HTS and the SSG are blamed for, while their efforts in minority areas fall short.

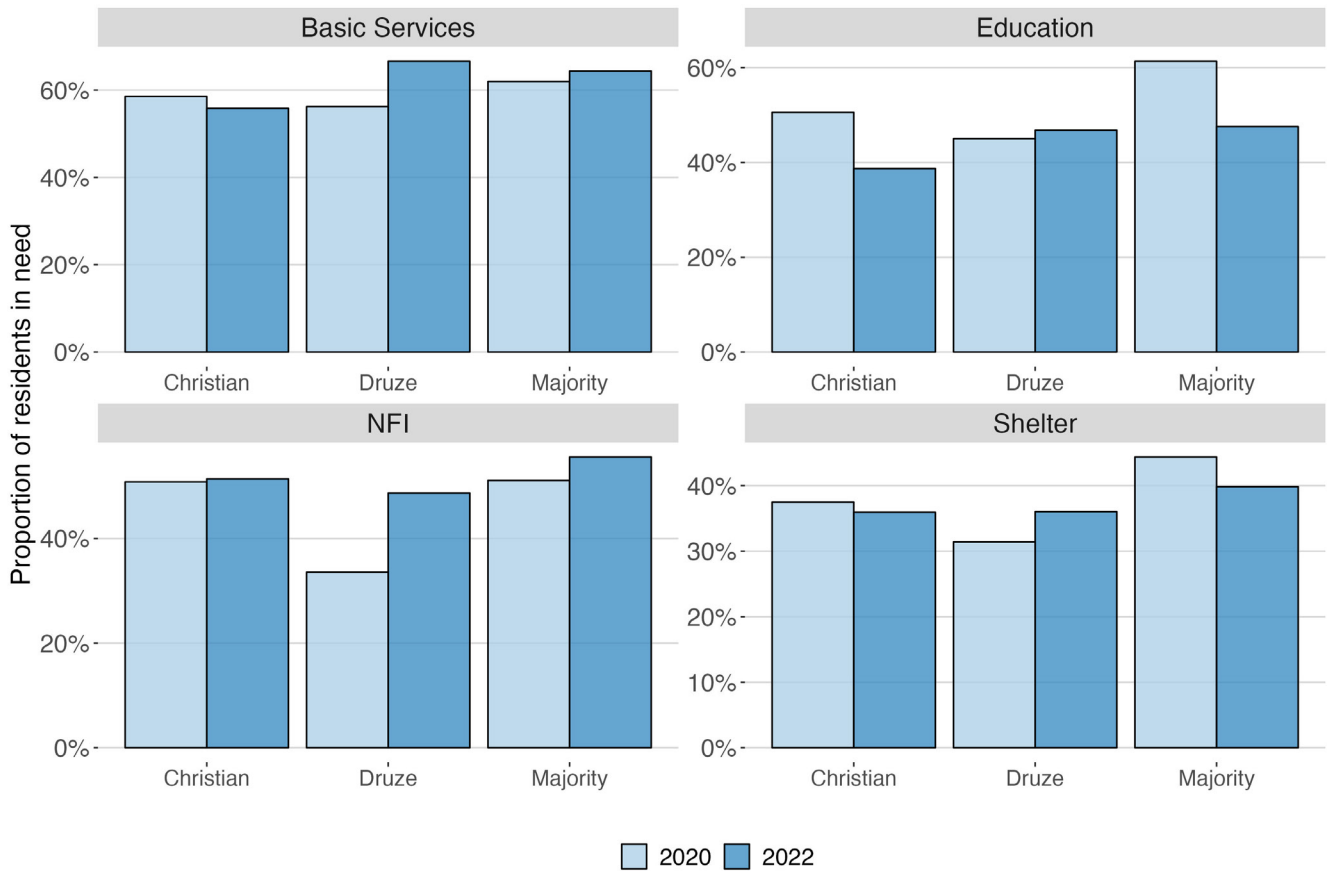
## *Measuring minority-majority disparities in humanitarian need*

The HAT measured the level of humanitarian need from 2020 to 2022<sup>10</sup> in minority communities under SSG control, relative to surrounding Sunni (majority) communities to ascertain whether there were any differences between the change in humanitarian need in minority and majority communities. The relationship between the change (2020 to 2022) in the proportion of the total population reporting a sector-specific priority need and the latest year's total population and population growth rate were measured in Christian, Druze, and majority communities. A random sample of three neighboring majority locations was selected per-minority community to generate a comparison group. The analysis was run 100 times with 100 different random comparison groups to ensure robustness. Statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) relationships recorded more than fifty times were considered valid results.

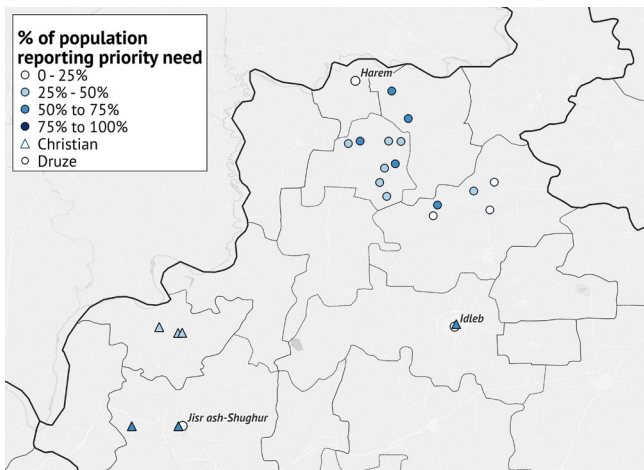
The proportion of the population reporting basic services, NFI, shelter, and education as priority needs increased at a statistically significantly higher rate than the surrounding majority communities. The proportion these categories as a priority need is shown in Figure 1. The need for basic services increased at a much faster rate in Druze communities (10 percentage points) than in majority communities (3 percentage points) while Christian communities reported three percentage points less basic services need.

9 Neither the SSG nor HTS contributed to cultivation expenses, which amounted to more than the 40% returns of selling produce.  
10 June to August averages





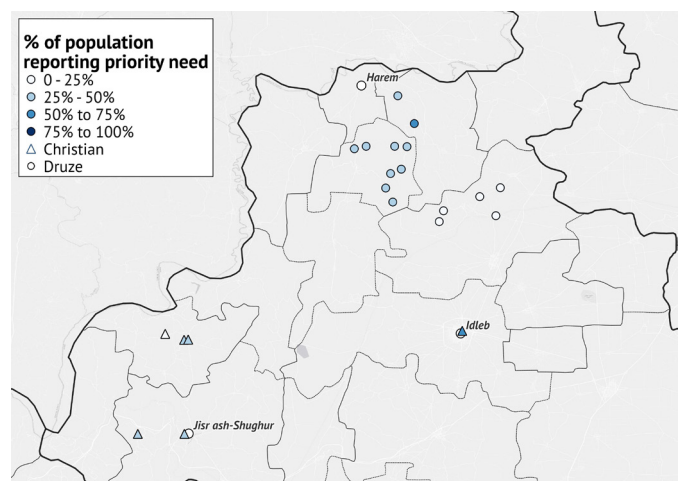
**Figure 1.** The average proportion of the population reporting the category as a priority need.



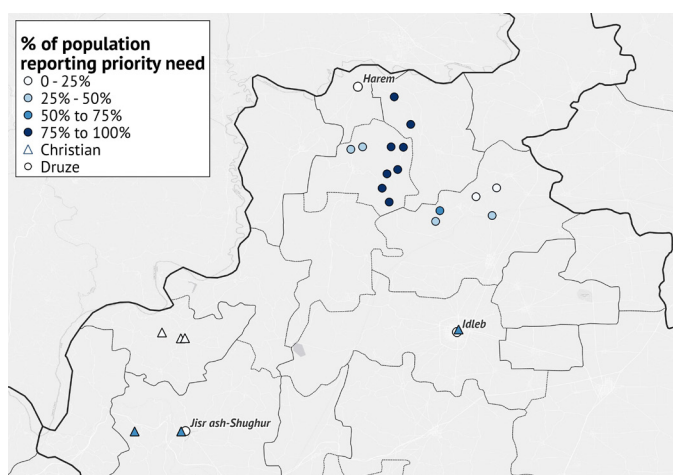
**Figure 2.** The proportion of the population reporting NFIs as a priority need.

Similarly, the proportion of the population reporting shelter as a priority modestly increased in Druze communities (about 5 percentage points) while shelter need decreased by 5 percentage points in the majority communities, and 2 percentage points less in Christian communities. The difference in education needs was most pronounced, as the proportion of the population in the major-

NFI need increased at a much faster rate in Druze community (15 percentage points) compared to majority communities (5 percentage points), and Christian communities NFI need only increased by 1 percentage point; however, Druze communities had much lower level of NFI need in 2020 (about 17 percentage points lower).



**Figure 3.** The proportion of the population reporting shelter as a priority need.



**Figure 4.** The proportion of the population reporting water as a priority need.

the need for basic services in Druze communities has grown faster than that of Christian and majority communities and now have by far the highest concentration of need. The level of NFI and shelter need in Druze communities increased at a much higher rate than non-Druze communities, likely a result of lower incomes that could be caused by economic discrimination.<sup>11</sup> The level of education needs in Druze did not decrease from 2020 to 2022, as was the case in Christian and majority communities, but remained at essentially the same level, which is comparable to the 2022 education needs of Christian and majority communities.

ity and Christian communities that reported education as a priority significantly declined by 14 and 12 percentage points, while the level of education needs in Druze communities remained unchanged. Education needs in Druze communities did not decline as rapidly as in other communities because Druze communities had a smaller proportion of the population (about 7 percentage points) reporting education as a priority in the baseline (2020) period.

The results suggest that Druze communities in SSG-controlled areas are in greater need of basic services than surrounding Christian and majority communities, and have experienced a relative decline in NFI and shelter provision. Since 2022,

## The evolution of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, following a violent ascent to control, has been slowly working to gain international recognition as a legitimate governance actor in Syria, and to shed any association with its 'terrorist' past. The separation from Al-Qaeda, and breakaways from first Jabhat An-Nusra, then Jabhat Tahrir al-Sham (both founded on extremist ideology), into a consolidation of groups under HTS, were the first step. Since then, the group has fought and defeated other, more extremist groups in Idlib – reasoning varying from doing so to remove competition, or to placate Turkey, who had agreed with Russia, in an agreement of March 2020, that its forces would remove extremism from Idlib as a condition that Russia does not invade the northwest.

Jolani's public appearances have also changed, from wearing military clothing, to appearing in religious dress, to civilian clothing; he has veered from speeches promoting religious conservatism, to modernization, and has separated himself from military events.<sup>12</sup> He has announced his desire that areas under his control become home to Sunni Muslims, against the encroaching Shia majority, led by Damascus and achieved through the naturalization of Iranian and Lebanese Shia Muslims. The measures Jolani has taken have been widely regarded as pragmatic; an attempt to appease external criticism against the group. However, concerns remain over HTS policies (evidenced by Jolani's violent past, arbitrary detention of civilians, and media repression), and how far his signaling of legitimacy is genuine.

<sup>11</sup> Syrians for Truth and Justice, [Idlib's Druze Complain of Persecution](#), November 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Jolani still on the US [terror lists](#) and one of America's most wanted men with a reward of up to ten million USD for information on him.

## *Extremist roots*

Discussions concerning the cohesiveness of HTS' public image predate the Jolani-led shift towards the minority communities in Idleb governorate and are more related to the group's consolidation of its position as the dominant actor in Idleb governorate, through centralizing power at the expense of other armed actors. For instance, media sources indicated that individual [defections](#) took place in 2016 by figures protesting the ill-treatment and violations targeting detainees (including opposition figures, civilians, and HTS members) in HTS-run prisons. Moreover, Jolani's announcement of HTS's separation from Al-Qaeda in 2016 caused [divisions](#) which consequently led to defections by religious clerics and Jabhat An-Nusra commanders, who later established the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Hurras Ad-Din (Guardians of Religion). Recently in April 2022, media sources reported a major defection in HTS's first ranks, as the head of Military Judiciary Abu Qassem al Shami and a group of his supporters ended their ties with the group, due to [ongoing conflicts](#) within both HTS-affiliated civilian and military institutions as well as the intensifying wave of arrests carried out by the General Security branch, targeting ex-HTS members, foreign combatants, and their families. It is worth noting that HTS also suspended the membership of several high-ranking officials, which local sources explained as a tactic by Jolani to ensure no coups or significant splits could take place against his interests.

The recent developments concerning HTS's shift towards minorities have had their fair share of criticism among ex-HTS figures, particularly foreign combatants and their local support base, Al-Qaeda sympathizers, and proponents of global jihadist ideologies. Local sources indicated that these individuals operate covertly to avoid arrest and are mainly active on social media outlets such as Telegram, a platform widely used by various extremist figures. Zooming in on several anti-HTS Telegram channels revealed that opposition to Jolani is based on two main narratives: First, there are significant grievances against HTS's ousting of foreign combatants and their families from houses which belonged to Christians. In September 2022, a group of foreign combatants issued a statement, protesting the forced evacuation from houses located in rural Idleb, following a short notice from the SSG. The statement proceeded to [protest](#) what it called HTS' discrimination against foreign combatants in favor of "Christian infidels," indicating that the foreign combatants communicated with Abu Julian, a Christian figure appointed by HTS to run the HLP portfolio in Qanniyeh and Yaqubiyeh, concerning potential compensations in return for evacuation, particularly that some of them incurred the costs of rehabilitating these houses. Another statement argued that the confiscation of Christians' properties was [considered](#) as spoils of war, particularly if the original residents permanently moved to government-held areas. While some statements particularly criticize the favoring of the Christian community by Jolani based on religious grounds, other statements are concerned with the marginalization and lack of support provided by HTS to shelter foreign combatants and their families.

Second, criticism is directed against Jolani for policies deemed to be inconsistent with the rulings of Islamic Shariah, such as the SSG's Education Directorate's [decision](#) to grant Christian teachers a paid pilgrimage vacation, the [reopening of churches](#) and resumption of religious worship by the Christian community, and allegedly [approving](#) the activities of feminist organizations. This narrative goes alongside similar statements on the pragmatic shift in Jolani's strategy, specifically the [split from Al-Qaeda](#) and the attempt to have HTS [removed](#) from the terrorist designation list, describing it as 'ideologically bankrupt' and as a form of 'masked secularism'.

While these ongoing underground opposition activities against Jolani's policies showcase extant divisions and challenges facing HTS's internal legitimacy, the possibility that this opposition develops to threaten Jolani's position within the group should not be underestimated. Research indicates that there have been attempts toward formal organization of anti-Jolani opposition; in September 2022, popular [protests](#)

against HTS, organized by the anti-HTS Hizb al Tahrir (Liberation Party) took place in the city of Atareb, following the arrest of Hizb al Tahrir official after he criticized the potential for rapprochement with the Syrian government. Local sources also reported that arrests by HTS's General Security have previously thwarted a covert meeting hosting radical clerics in the town of Killi, which implies the presence of a grassroots opposition movement, whose scope and influence are unknown. More importantly, on 8 November, the [suspension](#) of Abu Obedia al Qatanawi, the pro-HTS General Commander of Ahrar al-Sham following a decision by the five major armed factions within the group represented a major setback for HTS, as Jolani reportedly exercised close control over Ahrar al-Sham through his relationship with Al Qatanawi; the factions, who agreed to name Yousef al Hamawi as the new leader, [claimed](#) that the previous leadership "violated the fundamentals and the Shariah-based approach upon which the movement was based." While the previous leadership is still active and siding with HTS, local sources indicated that Turkey recognized and established communication with the Hamawi-headed faction of Ahrar al-Sham, a clear challenge to HTS's efforts to have broader control over armed opposition activities and command in northwest Syria.

## *International relations*

The international community does not recognize either HTS or its affiliated SSG as official actors within Syria – HTS is designated a terrorist organization by the US, UN and Turkey, and both are excluded from any international forums in relation to political solutions for Syria. [Jolani has protested](#) these classifications and exclusion; he has called for international support in his opposition's fight against Damascus, and the government of Bashar al-Assad, to which he has not been overtly successful. He has not as yet been targeted, however, internally by Damascus, by Russia or Turkey, or by the US or other international actors, showing, as told by former US envoy to Syria, [James Jeffrey](#), that he is important to the stability of the northwest.

Turkey also seemingly has an understanding with HTS; although there are no official relations between the two, there does appear to be pragmatic cooperation in relation to at least military control over the northwest. Part of a March 2020 ceasefire agreement with Russia stipulated that Turkey rid the northwest of extremism. The HAT has previously written of HTS' attacks and defeat of extremist groups being linked to this, as it is in both the interests of Turkey and HTS to prevent a Russian–Damascus offensive, and a takeover over their respective territories. Russia has recently accused Turkey of seeking to [transform HTS](#) into a moderate opposition group; whether true or not, the current organization of control in the region appears to have stabilized. Additionally, economic cooperation, in infrastructure development and service provision by Turkey, is said to take place, while most of the region has adopted the Turkish lira as their primary currency.

In terms of international public image, in September, HTS prevented the participants of a [Caravan of Peace](#) (protestors traveling from northern Syria into Turkey, with the aim of going further into Europe) from crossing the Syrian border; this was seen as a message to Turkey and Europe that HTS could help the countries' migration controls. Jolani also realizes that the treatment of minorities will be the focus of local and international media, and so it could be that there are improvements to service and aid provision in minority areas – these developments are expected to be led by the SSG and promoted widely, to be observable by external actors. Sources have said that Christians in Europe have been contacted by HTS, inviting them to return with promises of restoring their properties and rights. It is not expected that HTS' invitations will be accepted, however, the external message of tolerance and religious freedom remains. Christians are likely to lack confidence in HTS' ability to make any real change regarding their freedoms, on the grounds of the fundamental contradiction between what the minorities aspire to and what HTS' ideology allows.

## Conclusion

Despite the small number of Christians and Druze remaining in the northwest, HTS has, led by Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, realized their international importance in terms of public relations, and developed renewed efforts aimed at tolerance and governance. New policies announced by the HTS towards religious freedom and material support for minorities will not necessarily make any difference, either domestically due to a lack of will and implementation, or internationally due to a lack of trust in HTS. However, the efforts look to be part of incremental moves to change HTS' image and increase its legitimacy as a governing force.

Although the actions towards religious tolerance from HTS appear to be part of a wider public relations strategy, they could have positive effects on minorities. The possibility of obtaining more religious freedom to practice their rites is a good thing, as is reclaiming possession of their property. There may also follow increased support from the SSG to achieve an improvement in their living conditions. Minorities, therefore, in theory, stand to benefit, a welcome change for many in the opposition-held northwest. There is, however, doubt over whether HTS' apparent pivot towards tolerance is genuine; it could be that very little changes in Idleb, and minorities continue to be persecuted – it is not expected that high numbers of minorities will be responding to HTS invites to return.



*Syrian Druze in Idleb: The population of the Druze minority is now just 15,000 throughout Idleb, some fleeing to government-held areas, and others displaced or moved abroad.*

## CONTACT

Eric Economy

Humanitarian Access Team

[eeconomy@mercycorps.org](mailto:eeconomy@mercycorps.org)

The Humanitarian Access Team (HAT) was established in Beirut in March 2015 in response to the collective challenges facing the remote humanitarian response in Syria. HAT's most important function is to collect and analyze disparate data and information. Since 2015, HAT analysis has provided a forward-looking template for international interventions in Syria, and facilitated an increasingly adaptive, integrated, and ultimately impactful international response to the conflict.

