



# TSC INSIGHTS

## THE LEGACY AND EVOLUTION OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN SYRIA

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### Executive Summary

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, following the launch of the “Deter Aggression” campaign by Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and allied opposition factions, marked a turning point in Syria’s conflict and the role of foreign fighters within it. As the war shifted, so too did the presence and influence of tactical units made up of foreign fighters – groups that have since played a critical role in reshaping modern militant strategy in the region. Now, as the Trump administration announced following the president’s recent meeting with Syrian interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa in Saudi Arabia, as the U.S. is set to relieve sanctions on Syria, President Trump urged al-Sharaa to “tell all foreign terrorists to leave Syria.”<sup>1</sup> This step, however, if implemented, could potentially cause immense challenges for Syria for several reasons, not least of which is that some of these foreign fighters

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, “Trump Meets Sharaa: Writing a New Chapter in U.S.-Syria Relations,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 14, 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/trump-meets-sharaa-writing-new-chapter-us-syria-relations>

have already been given high-ranking military positions in the country's new armed forces.<sup>2</sup>

This Insight examines the emergence, evolution, and resurgence of various foreign fighter groups in Syria, many of which were central to the operational success of the anti-Assad campaign. These groups have trained HTS's special forces, participated directly in major offensives, and leveraged propaganda to spread knowledge and recruit followers. Though largely aligned along national or ethnic lines, their cooperation in the field has grown markedly in recent years. Syria is entering an uncertain post-conflict phase, and one major question becomes what to do with foreign fighters — incorporate them into a new Syrian military, or evict them from the country, where many of these groups would potentially pose new transnational threats.

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<sup>2</sup> Farangis Najibullah, "Foreign Fighters Promoted in Syria's New Army Have Their Governments Concerned," *RFE/RL*, January 8, 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/foreign-fighters-syria-military-hts-blowback-concerns/33266542.html>

## Introduction

Since 2016, the jihadist landscape, particularly the Syrian theatre of operations, has witnessed the emergence and expansion of foreign militant groups comprised of jihadists from abroad.<sup>3</sup> The stated objective of these groups is to provide advice, military training, and interventions in certain military operations. In the latter case, all the foreign militant groups had a strong presence in a major military operation – “Deterring Aggression”,<sup>4</sup> launched on November 27, 2024, by the coalition formed by Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and rebel and opposition factions, ultimately leading to the toppling of the Assad regime in December.

Taking a step back, however, it is important to remember that among the first and most notorious foreign militant group to emerge in Syria was Malhama Tactical,<sup>5</sup> a group founded in 2015 composed of immigrants from Russian territories and Central Asian countries (Chechnya, Dagestan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan). They started disseminating videos, photos, and training courses and collaborated with HTS and other jihadist groups, such as the Chechen-led Ajnad al-Kavkaz and the Syrian branch of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP).

Malhama Tactical’s ascent was propelled in part by its media and propaganda capabilities. The group produced extensive propaganda and offered various services such as building and selling weapons and tactical training videos, conducting special operations, and even conducting military operations with other jihadist groups, like the Turkistan Islamic Party and Ajnad al-Kavkaz. Malhama Tactical used different channels to spread their propaganda, including a website, Telegram channel, and pages on Facebook and Instagram. Most of the members of Malhama Tactical were fluent in the local Middle Eastern languages and Russian. They offered training courses and militia counseling in-person and online, simulated battles, armed confrontations, special operations (including urban fighting, ambushes, and first aid) in-person and online, produced (and taught to produce) military equipment and materials (improvised grenade construction, explosives, IEDs, etc.). They also offered elite corps service to conduct special operations for jihadist groups. The training modules also incorporated lessons from the strategic tactics of foreign armies. As of December 2021, Malhama Tactical’s Syrian training camps remain operational, though they no longer produce propaganda after they

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<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper, what some have referred to as “tactical groups” are labeled as foreign militant groups or simply foreign fighters.

<sup>4</sup> On November 27, 2024, the National Coalition of the Syrian Revolutionary Armed Forces and the opposition, in collaboration with Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its al-Fateh al-Mubin operations room through the joint “Management of Military Operations” operation room, launched the largest military operation in recent years against regime-controlled areas in northern and northwestern Syria, in a surprise offensive that led to the overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad regime on December 8, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Rao Komar, Christian Borys, and Eric Woods. “The Blackwater of Jihad,” *Foreign Policy*, February 10, 2017. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/10/the-world-first-jihadi-private-military-contractor-syria-russia-malhama-tactical/>.

were fully integrated into the special units of HTS known as the Liwa<sup>6</sup> “al-Asaib al-Hamrah.” In January 2023, HTS published videos and photos of the military parade of the Liwa “Muawiyahbin Abu Sufyan” and the Liwa “al-Asaib al-Hamrah.” Notably, one of the photos showed the then-leader of Malhama Tactical, Ali al-Shishani.



*Figure 1 Picture from Telegram channel*

However, after two years of absence from propaganda, in early January 2025, Malhama Tactical announced its return, with a message stating that Ali al-Shishani was no longer a commander and member of the group. The new commander is Abdullah Tac (pictured below). The group announced the resumption of training and military activities in northern Syria, reusing old logos and areas of activity but creating new propaganda channels on Telegram, X (formerly known as Twitter), and Instagram.



*Figure 2 Picture of Abdullah Tac from Instagram*

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<sup>6</sup> Liwa means brigade in Arabic.



Since January, Tac has released propaganda material almost daily and has written: "After the fall of Assad, our work is resuming with renewed vigor." Their training has resumed with the development of various activities: target shooting with guns and rifles, use of drones, use of RPGs, and guerrilla and forestry operations. Unlike in the past, they have also innovatively introduced training in tactical medicine. The group currently has between 50 and 70 members, and given its notoriety and importance (as well as its important role within the HTS special forces), it could grow rapidly.

This Insight explores foreign militant groups that have operated in Syria for some time, including Yurtugh Tactical, Albanian Tactical, Muhojir Tactical, among others. While born after Malhama Tactical, they have all played an important role in military activities to overthrow the Assad regime. Within the jihadist galaxy, these battle groups are well regarded for helping fighters learn to conduct "modern warfare" and to face military operations with proper preparation. They could be instrumental in the formation of the new Syrian army, and, as they are made up of foreign fighters, should also be monitored for their potential future targets outside of Syria.

## Yurtugh Tactical

Yurtugh Tactical was founded by Uyghur fighters in 2018. The foreign militant group consists exclusively of highly specialized veteran Uyghur fighters who decided to train because, according to their spokesperson, interviewed by the author, the Uyghurs were "deprived of military knowledge by the Chinese regime" and therefore "realized that [their] people were far behind in the military."<sup>7</sup>

The objectives of the Yurtugh Tactical group are threefold: "To provide military knowledge and training to the Uyghur population," to fight the "Chinese oppressor regime to free our land from occupiers," and "to establish the East Turkestan State."<sup>8</sup> Yurtugh's spokesman also specified that all their operations are exclusively focused on the "liberation of [their] land from Chinese occupiers."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Daniele Garofalo. "Yurtugh Tactical: Interview with their spokesman and their goals in the 'Jihadist Galaxy.'" *Daniele Garofalo Monitoring (blog)*. January 21, 2023.

<https://www.danielegarofalomonitoring.com/p/yurtugh-tactical-interview-with-their>.

<sup>8</sup> The goal of Yurtugh Tactical, as well as that of the Uyghur jihadist group of the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), is to free Xinjiang from Chinese control and establish an independent Muslim Uyghur state governed by Islamic law. For more, see: <https://jamestown.org/program/yurtugh-tactical-profiling-the-anti-chinese-uyghur-training-group-in-syria/>.

<sup>9</sup> The Xinjiang Uyghur (known until 1955 as East Turkestan) has been fighting against the Chinese empire since 1800 for its independence (since the 8th century the area was inhabited and ruled by Uyghur and Turkish khanates). The Uyghurs (or Turkestans) opposed the Chinese rule of the Qing dynasty (1820-1877) and succeeded in establishing an independent emirate in Kashgar, characterized by an autocratic government (1868-77). Chinese General Zuo Zongtang reconquered Turkestan and

The group's name refers exclusively to the military term “Yurtugh”, which identifies a special military unit of the army of the Turkish Kanato Kara-Khanid dynasty.<sup>10</sup> The group’s spokesman emphasized that the group's priority is only the “Uyghur cause”.



*Figure 3 Picture from Yutugh Tactical Telegram channel*

In August 2024, the group officially joined the HTS brigades in the Liwa Zaid bin Haritha unit and collaborated with the “al-Fateh al-Mubin Operations Room,” the command and coordination structure used by the coalition. Yurtugh Tactical maintains relations with other foreign militant groups, such as Albanian Tactical and is allied with the Chechen jihadist group Ajnad al-Kavkaz,<sup>11</sup> with which it has shared numerous photos and videos of joint training in its media.

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annexed it as an administrative province of China on October 17, 1884. After the collapse of the Qing dynasty, the Uyghurs again opposed China and established the East Turkestan or Kashgar Republic (1933-34) and that of Ghulja (1944-49) with the help of the Soviet Union. Annexed in 1949 to the People’s Republic of China (PRC), on October 1, 1955, the province became the autonomous region of Xinjiang Uyghur. From this period, numerous independence groups and jihadists emerged to oppose the PRC. The most famous and active was the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) established in 1997; many consider the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) to be a subsidiary or splinter group under the ETIM. For years, the Chinese Communist Party has oppressed and persecuted the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. The CCP is taking draconian measures to destroy the Islamic identity of the Uyghurs, keeping millions of them under strict electronic and physical surveillance. For more, see: <https://www.cfr.org/background/east-turkestan-islamic-movement-etim>.

<sup>10</sup> Daniele Garofalo. “Yurtugh Tactical: Interview with their spokesman and their goals in the “Jihadist Galaxy.” *Daniele Garofalo Monitoring (blog)*. January 21, 2023.

<https://www.danielegarofalomonitoring.com/p/yurtugh-tactical-interview-with-their>.

<sup>11</sup> Ajnad al-Kavkaz, “Soldiers of the Caucasus,” is an independent Chechen jihadist group that emerged in 2015 in Syria from the merger of two groups of Chechen veterans whose fighters previously belonged to the former Caucasian Emirate. The group has always remained independent but collaborated with HTS, Ansar al-Tawhid, Malhama Tactical, and Jaysh Muhajireen wal Ansar between 2015-2024. The current leader of Ajnad al-Kavkaz is Commander-in-Chief Abdul Malik al-Shishani. In 2024, the activity of Ajnad al-Kavkaz grew, both in terms of propaganda and military, starting an active collaboration with HTS and its operations room and allying itself with Jaysh Muhajireen wal Ansar (LMA), Muhojir Tactical, Xhemati Alban, Albanian Tactical, and Yurtugh Tactical.

Beginning in August 2021, Yurtugh Tactical began to spread its training courses as a means of propaganda on various messaging apps and social networks, such as Telegram and Instagram.<sup>12</sup> The decision to spread photos and videos is motivated by the fact that “through our work in the media, other Uyghurs can begin to familiarize themselves with the knowledge. We also want to show our people that our land was taken from us by force and can only be returned in the same way.”<sup>13</sup>

Yurtugh Tactical has released high-definition videos, posters, and photo sets. The training videos last from 20 seconds to more than five minutes and show different types of training, such as pistol training courses, techniques to unlock malfunctioning or jammed rifles, tactical exercises, exercises to improve speed in hitting targets, two-gun shooting exercises, 50- and 75-meter pistol shooting exercises, night shooting exercises with PEQ-15s, group exercises, and reloading the weapon with a wounded limb.



*Figure 4 Picture from Yurtugh Tactical Telegram channel*

There are also videos explaining the basic rules for firearm safety, different types of training, and how, and in what contexts, weapons should be used. Posters, on the other hand, are exclusively ideological and propagandistic, while photos show moments of preparation, study, training, and tactical and military equipment.

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<sup>12</sup> Daniele Garofalo. "Yurtugh Tactical: Profiling the Anti-Chinese Uyghur Training Group in Syria." *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume 21, Issue 2 (January 2023), <https://jamestown.org/program/yurtugh-tactical-profiling-the-anti-chinese-uyghur-training-group-in-syria/>.

<sup>13</sup> Daniele Garofalo. "Yurtugh Tactical: Interview with their spokesman and their goals in the 'Jihadist Galaxy.'" *Daniele Garofalo Monitoring (blog)*. January 21, 2023. <https://www.danielegarofalomonitoring.com/p/yurtugh-tactical-interview-with-their>.

## Albanian Tactical

The jihadist group called Albanian Tactical, is the tactical group of Xhemati Alban, or “Albanian Congregation,” has been operating in Syria since 2012.<sup>14</sup> Xhemati Alban is composed of Albanians, Kosovars, and Macedonians and consists of around 60-100 members. The foreign militant group has been operational since around 2017 and has played an essential role in the northwestern Syrian jihadist landscape. Despite its small numbers, it manages both military and operational aspects, conducting offensives and defending Ribat points (defensive lines along the war front) in the governorates of Idlib, Hama, Aleppo, and Latakia, and the organization and management of training camps. Albanian Tactical, as well as training Xhemati Alban’s fighters in the field, promotes strong propaganda, particularly regarding military operations conducted by their snipers and military training and planning units. The group produces high-quality photos and videos in which one can see training with numerous weapons, assaults, guerrilla warfare, shooting exercises, the production and modification of weapons, and the use of drones. All the propaganda for the group is spread on Telegram, Instagram, and X.



*Figure 5 Picture from Albanian Tactical Telegram channel*

Albanian Tactical has been aligned with HTS since 2017 and cooperates with the “al-Fateh al-Mubeen Operations Room.”<sup>15</sup> It has also cooperated with Yurtugh Tactical and Ajnad al-Kavkaz several times. The leader of Albanian Tactical, Katab

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<sup>14</sup> Daniele Garofalo. “Albanian Jihadists in Syria.” *Daniele Garofalo Monitoring (blog)*. May 15, 2023. <https://www.danielegarofalomonitoring.com/p/albanian-jihadists-in-syria/>.

<sup>15</sup> Daniele Garofalo. “Albanian Jihadists in Syria.” *Daniele Garofalo Monitoring (blog)*. May 15, 2023. <https://www.danielegarofalomonitoring.com/p/albanian-jihadists-in-syria/>.

al-Albani (shown in the photo below), took an active part in the military operations of “Deter Aggression.”<sup>16</sup>



*Figure 6 Picture from Albanian Tactical Instagram page*

## Muhojir Tactical

In November 2022, a foreign militant group founded by Chechen and Uzbek fighters in the Idlib governorate, Muhojir Tactical, was announced on various social networking and messaging platforms. Muhojir Tactical is active on numerous messaging platforms and social networks, disseminating propaganda. One of the founders, Abu Valid al-Shami, explained, in an interview with the author, what the foreign militant group is about: “In this project, there will be introductions on how to use weapons, we will explain mistakes that should not be made in battle or actions that should be performed, what uniforms and tactical material to use, how they should be worn.”<sup>17</sup> The foreign militant group was founded by two military instructors of the Uzbek jihadist group Tavhid va Jihod: Abu Valid al-Shami and Ayyub Hawk (the latter is also military instructor Jaysh al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (LMA)).

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<sup>16</sup> Daniele Garofalo. “HTS and its allies. Who are the jihadist groups involved in the operation to “Deter Aggression.” *Daniele Garofalo Monitoring (blog)*. December 6, 2024. <https://www.danielegarofalomonitoring.com/p/hts-and-its-allies-who-are-the-jihadist>.

<sup>17</sup> Daniele Garofalo. “Interview with the Founder of Syria-Based Muhojir Tactical.” *Daniele Garofalo Monitoring (blog)*. May 12, 2023. <https://www.danielegarofalomonitoring.com/p/interview-with-the-founder-of-syria>.





*Figure 7 Picture from Muhojir Tactical Instagram page*

Muhojir Tactical's videos explain, in detail, different types of military clothing and tactical accessories, explaining their functionality. Videos also demonstrate how to use the various types of weapons available in the Syrian context, such as AKM59, KPVT, sniper rifles, AK47, AK103, and AK104, as well as how to carry out repairs to automatic weapons and practice tactics and marksmanship. The video and photo material produced by Muhojir Tactical has been widely distributed on social networks and messaging apps, such as Telegram, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp, as well as across Russian-language channels, Uzbek-language channels, Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (KTJ) and LMA-related channels, and many pro-HTS channels, reaching thousands of views.

In June 2024, Muhojir Tactical also launched its video podcast: "Muhojir Podcast", in which various military, ideological, and geopolitical topics are discussed.





*Figure 8 Picture from Muhojir Tactical Instagram page*

Tactical Muhojir took an active part in the military operations of "Deter Aggression" alongside the Uzbek jihadist group Tavhid va Jihod, particularly in the countryside of Aleppo, Hama, and Homs.

The author interviewed the leader and instructor of Muhojir Tactical, Kyrgyz Ayyub Hawk, who explained the group's objectives. In addition to helping HTS overthrow the Asaad regime and the importance of training Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Kyrgyz, the group's future goal is to fight "Central Asian regimes and Russian influence, because people are tired of corruption and oppression".<sup>18</sup>

### Other Militant Groups

On June 18, 2023, the **Fursan Tactical** group was founded in Idlib. It is a group composed of Turkish fighters and embedded in the Liwa Hamza bin Abdul Muttalib.

They have distinguished themselves over the past year and a half for their day and night sniping operations and frequent use of drones. They actively participated in the "Deter Aggression" campaign, alongside the other jihadist battle groups and HTS, in the Aleppo, Hama, and Homs countryside, and were among the first to reach Damascus.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Daniele Garofalo. "Interview with the Founder of Syria-Based Muhojir Tactical." *Daniele Garofalo Monitoring* (blog). May 12, 2023. <https://www.danielegarofalomonitoring.com/p/interview-with-the-founder-of-syria>. For a deeper analysis of Central Asian fighters, please refer to other analyses of The Soufan Center: <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-terrorism-trends-in-central-asia/> or <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2024-march-29/>

<sup>19</sup> Abdulaziz Kilani and Alex Shams Wright. "Explainer: Foreign fighters and Syrian factions fighting alongside HTS." *BBC Monitoring*. December 24, 2024. <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0002zwn>.



*Figure 9 Picture from Fursan Tactical Instagram page*

In June 2024, a new jihadist militant group composed of Tajiks and Kazakhs called **Musafeer Tactical** emerged in Idlib.<sup>20</sup> Its founder, Abu Hubaib, and the group are integrated into the Liwa Hamza bin Abdul Muttalib. The group has distinguished itself by training in urban and forest guerrilla contexts. They actively participated in the “Deter Aggression” campaign, in the Aleppo, Hama, and Homs countryside.



*Figure 10 Picture from Musafeer Tactical Telegram channel*

At the end of June 2023, a new jihadist militant group emerged in Idlib: **FSM1453 Tactical**. The group is composed of Turkish jihadists, although on its Telegram and Instagram, it claims to be composed of “numerous Syrian and non-Syrian Arabs.” The group is integrated into HTS in the Liwa Hamza bin Abdul Muttalib. In its in-person training and video dissemination, the group has demonstrated training in

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<sup>20</sup> Daniele Garofalo. “HTS and its allies. Who are the jihadist groups involved in the operation to “Deter Aggression.” *Daniele Garofalo Monitoring (blog)*. December 6, 2024. <https://www.danielegarofalomonitoring.com/p/hts-and-its-allies-who-are-the-jihadist>.

different physical environments and terrain, such as urban and forest, and with various types of weapons (especially RPGs) and armored vehicles. They actively participated in the “Deter Aggression” campaign alongside the jihadist group Mujahidin Ghuroba Division.



*Figure 11 Picture from FSM1453 Tactical Telegram channel*

On October 12, 2024, a new jihadist militant group emerged: **Tactical Omaid**. This group is integrated into HTS in the brigade “Talha bin Obaid Allah.” The group publishes its material in Arabic and German and some of its men are German nationals, including its founding leader Omaid al-Almany. They actively participated in the “Deter Aggression” campaign. In a private interview, its leader and commander told the author that the group's goal was “to liberate Syria from the tyrant and free all prisoners, now we will move on to the second phase, we will develop more and more in training and move from the faction situation to a broader situation”.



*Figure 12 Picture from Tactical Omaid Telegram channel*

On June 19, 2024, the jihadist militant group **Tacmed Sham** was established with the task of teaching and training jihadist groups in-person and online on “tactical and emergency medicine” in case fighters are injured in battle or during military operations.<sup>21</sup> The group was founded by a fighter and medic named Abu Ismail and currently disseminates propaganda material in Russian. The groups involved in this project are Muhojir Tactical, Yurtugh Tactical, Musafeer Tactical, Jaysh al-Muhajireen wal Ansar Brigade, Tavhid va Jihod Uzbek, and Ajnad al-Kavkaz. In the different videos released, Abu Ismail explains in detail what types of bandages are used, how to dress a groin wound, an armpit wound, and a neck wound, and how to apply tourniquets in different contexts and for different wounds.



*Figure 13 Picture from Tacmed Sham Telegram channel*

In November 2023, HTS fighter and military instructor, Russian national Abu Jandal al-Rusi, created the **Warrior Project**. It is a project anchored around in-person and online training (they are present on all platforms and social networks) to train or improve the military skills of the mujahideen, especially those in Russian, as confirmed by its leader in an interview conducted by the author:

“I am Russian by nationality, I have been fighting in Syria for 3 years, I belong to the HTS, and I am among the migrants. I embarked on the path of military instructor relatively recently, I saw that the military training of our soldiers was relatively poor and I decided to become an instructor to try to contribute to the training of recruits. My friends suggested that I start a project so that people could see what we do and what we are doing, and the advantage is that there are no Russians in the information field who

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<sup>21</sup> For more see: <https://x.com/G88Daniele/status/1803473351958036556>.



cover military topics from the Islamic side, so I decided to take this step despite everything. My goal is to spread the military appeal in the form of Islam to all Russian-speaking brothers so that everyone who watches the video will understand that there are brothers in jihad who cover their activities properly.”

In the past year, they have been training together with other foreign militant groups and with Mujahidin Ghuroba Division. They actively participated in the “Deter Aggression” campaign.



*Figure 14 Picture from the Warrior Project Instagram page*

## Conclusion

The rise and consolidation of battle groups in Syria provide two interesting elements. The first is the definitive affirmation of these groups within the broader jihadist landscape. This is important because the spread of their training propaganda, as well as their growth, poses new challenges, as it leads to further expansion of armed capabilities and combat skills. The second interesting element is that, although the foreign militant groups seem to be divided according to nationality and connection with a particular jihadist group, in recent years they have learned to work together. This is the case of Yurtugh Tactical, Muhojir Tactical, and Albanian Tactical, which in the last two years have conducted joint training and released numerous video and photographic materials simultaneously on numerous channels.

It should also be stressed that these training groups are not to be regarded as mercenaries or contractors; they do not operate for profit. Instead, the combat groups described in this Insight are not only highly trained, but are also strongly motivated ideologically and religiously. Foreign fighters working together with HTS or within brigades aligned to the al-Fateh al-Mubin operations room have forged close links with other jihadist groups, created alliances, and established logistical and support networks that could be essential in the future if they decide to change their theatre of operations.

The combined experience and expertise of these groups has been decisive for the growth of the capacities of HTS and its allies, including Jaysh Muhajireen wal Ansar, Tavhid va Jihod, Katibat Ghuroba al-Turkestan, Ajnad al-Kavkaz, Xhemati Alban, the Turkestan Islamic Party, etc. These groups successfully overthrew the Assad regime, playing a leading role in the rapid advances that led to a decisive victory within.

HTS's special forces, known as the "Red Bands,"<sup>22</sup> have been directly trained by Malhama Tactical, Fursan Tactical, and others. In addition to direct military training, groups such as Albanian Tactical, Muhojir Tactical, Fursan Tactical, and Yurtugh Tactical also took part directly in the conquest of Aleppo, Hama, and Homs.

For the jihadist and allied foreign militant groups, the Syrian theatre has been an arena in which to train and gain experience, a crucial step towards expanding the jihadist fight to other theatres of operation. Even the smallest or independent jihadist groups can achieve a high level of military capability and training through online propaganda, as well as remote and in-person training provided by these networks. Finally, considering the assertions of these groups in their propaganda channels, as well as statements made in interviews and private chats with the

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<sup>22</sup> The Syria Report. "The Radiography of HTS Military and Governance Capabilities." *The Syria Report*. December 04, 2024. <https://syria-report.com/a-radiography-of-hts-military-and-governance-capabilities/>.



author, it should be noted that now that the war in Syria is over (though the groups continue to publish photos and videos of their training on Syrian soil), their ultimate goal is to return to their homelands and fight to liberate their lands from those they consider oppressors.

To date, although they will remain in Syria for several more months, the key areas to be monitored — considering the language of their propaganda and the nationality of their fighters — are Russia, particularly the North Caucasus (Chechnya and Dagestan), China (the Xinjiang area), Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and the Balkans, particularly Albania and Kosovo. In regard to the threat posed by Turkish and German fighters, it is still difficult to decipher their objectives. Additionally, the areas where al-Qaeda and Islamic State operate are to be excluded for now, as these groups have strongly opposed and criticized the two main Salafi jihadist organizations.

How the next phase unfolds will have long-lasting implications, not just for Syria, but for the terrorist threat landscape more broadly. Many of the foreign fighters in the ranks of HTS have been in Syria for many years, some have married Syrian women and have had children while living in Syria. If these individuals are not incorporated into the Syrian armed forces, they could go on to join al-Qaeda or Islamic State. In fact, in ISIS's latest issue of *al-Naba*, the group makes an explicit plea for these foreign fighters to join its ranks.

No solution will be ideal. But, as The Soufan Center Senior Research Fellow Wassim Nasr recently said at The Global Security Forum's side event on Syria, "we need to think out of the box," before going on to reference other occasions where foreign fighters were excluded from a post-conflict political settlement and went on to form roving bands of jihadi fighters, who then traveled on to other conflict zones in the Balkans, the Caucasus, North Africa, and elsewhere. A similar situation could result if al-Sharaa is forced to jettison all of the foreign fighters from HTS' ranks. And, as detailed throughout this paper, those hardliners will then go on to threaten other countries, including their countries of origin, whether in Europe, the Middle East, or Asia. There is also the very real possibility that, if jettisoned, these foreign fighters could turn on the interim Syrian government itself, destabilizing the country at a crucial time, when the international community is attempting to determine how to help the war-torn country how to rebuild after decades of brutal dictatorship and fourteen years of internecine civil war and insurgency.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Omar Abdel-Baqi, "Foreign Jihadists Helped Syria's Rebels Take Power. Now They're a Problem," *Wall Street Journal*, April 30, 2025, [https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/foreign-jihadists-helped-syrias-rebels-take-power-now-theyre-a-problem-4ad99782?st=tNUqdm&reflink=article\\_email\\_share](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/foreign-jihadists-helped-syrias-rebels-take-power-now-theyre-a-problem-4ad99782?st=tNUqdm&reflink=article_email_share)

### About the Author

Daniele Garofalo is a researcher and analyst on Salafist-jihadist terrorism and Armed Islamist and jihadist insurgent groups. He is an expert in monitoring the media channels of the above-mentioned groups, their propaganda and military activity. He is a teacher trainer and coordinator of the teaching staff of the Italian training organisation Jus et Pax, which provides training for the Italian Armed Forces, in particular the Italian Army. As a researcher and analyst he collaborates and has collaborated with numerous centres and media outlets, including the James Town Foundation, the CTC at West Point, Akhbar al-Aan Media Tv, the Sawab Center, The Khorasan Diary, Militant Wire and the Robert Lansing Institute. He also does security consulting for corporations and private companies and shares many of his monitoring analyses on his personal website <https://www.danielegarofalomonitoring.com/>.



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