

Renewing a Lifeline for the Hapless in Syria's Idlib

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The UN Security Council's unanimous decision to extend the organisation's use of the Bab Al Hawa crossing on the Syrian-Turkish border by six months, with another six-month extension if approved by the secretary general, has renewed a lifeline for the hapless civilians living in Syria's Idlib province. The UN will continue to ferry food and medical supplies across that frontier, and coordinate and fund the flow of supplies provided by relief agencies. It is estimated that 1,000 loaded lorries cross every month into Syria. Three-quarters of the 3-plus million people residing in north-west Syria depend on foreign aid, 85 per cent of which, reportedly, enters through this crossing.

Russia and the US were at loggerheads over Bab Al Hawa. Moscow sought to close this crossing, arguing that all aid should be channelled through government-held crossings since maintaining Bab Al Hawa violates Syrian state sovereignty. Russia is correct. Most countries, including the US, would reject the imposition by the UN or another external agency of an entry point that would allow the free flow of goods into their territory outside government control. Particularly, if the goods were destined for an area held by an inveterate enemy.

After all, Hay'at Tahrir Al Shamm the takfiri group which holds north-west Idlib province, has tried to overthrow the Syrian government, is crushing rival factions and is trying to set up a separate state in Idlib and adjacent tracts of territory.

Washington wanted to open another two crossings, one into the north-west and the other into the north-east which would supply the US-backed Kurdish held area, comprising 25 per cent of Syria. There had, originally, been four crossings, three of which the Russians had insisted on closing down. Russia compromised by holding back its veto on Bab Al Hawa.

This has, of course, angered humanitarian agencies which had called for the opening of all four, making their job easier. US President Joe Biden, reportedly, raised this issue when he met his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in Geneva last month.

While the humanitarian significance of Bab al-Hawa is all too obvious. The majority of the 3.5 million Syrians who live in Idlib and other northern areas depend on it for food, medical supplies and shelter. But donors think of the politico-military importance of this crossing. By providing for the population of Idlib, UN and the Western donors stabilising the reign of

Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham, which is an off-shoot of Al Qaeda and has established its base in Idlib, at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. This could expose the backyard of Europe to takfiri infiltration and should pose a dilemma for Western politicians but does not.

Perhaps, the intention of the Western powers is to use leverage provided by Tahrir Al Sham to exert pressure on the Syrian government to capitulate to Western demands. So far this has failed. Western powers adopted such a policy earlier when they refused to tackle Daesh while it campaigned in western Iraq, capturing major Sunni cities before conquering the Syrian city of Raqqa in 2014 and sweeping across the border to occupy Iraq's second city, Mosul, and 40 per cent of that country.

Founded as Jabhat al-Nusra in December 2012, by Abu Mohammad Al Julani, Tahrir Al Sham is a sibling of Daesh and no less ambitious. The two are the most successful of the takfiri groups which were born in Iraq after the US occupation and crossed the border into Syria to wage war on the Damascus government. The Jabhat was meant to be the Syrian branch of Daesh. But once Daesh itself entered the Syrian conflict, it attempted to dominate the Jabhat which declared independence and became Al Qaeda's official arm in Syria.

Like Daesh, the Jabhat attacked minority religious groups in Syria — Christians, Druze and Alawites, as well as Sunnis who did not subscribe to its beliefs or submit to its rule. Unlike Daesh which not only fights the Syrian government but also has a mission to strike at the West, Julani's objective has been confined to overthrowing the Syrian government. Julani was ordered by Al Qaeda chief Ayman al- Zawahiri not to mount attacks in the West. Nevertheless, the Jabhat has been designated a "terrorist" group since 2012.

Although Julani allegedly severed ties with Al Qaeda, Zawahiri dispatched key aides to join the Jabhat's leadership. His priority was for the group to capture enough strategic Syrian territory to establish a permanent Al Qaeda power base. This is precisely what it has done.

In 2017, the Jabhat, which had undergone multiple name changes, rebranded itself as Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham and since then has asserted control of most of Idlib. The group seeks to turn Idlib into a separate entity governed exclusively by Tahrir Al Sham, which has ordered rival factions to dissolve and their fighters to join its ranks or leave Idlib. Al though pledged not to mount operations in the West, Tahrir Al Sham has celebrated such attacks by Daesh and other takfiri factions. Tahrir Al Sham is, after all, the child of Al Qaeda and sibling of Daesh. Perhaps Tahrir Al Sham has adopted the practice of Takiyya, dissimulation as a means of self-protection, until the group is powerful enough to export both adherents and ideology from its base in northwest Syria.

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