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Leah Bader   April 10, 2020

Guns and Grievances: A Rhetorical Analysis of Populism in Syrian Militant Social Media

Communications

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Abstract

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Populism is on the rise globally, with significant impacts on electoral outcomes and political power. However, the study of this prominent political ideology and communication style within the literature is concerned with electoral contexts and does not present sufficient analysis of populism within civil conflict. This thesis represents one of the first attempts to evaluate militant group populist rhetoric by constructing a theoretical framework of electoral populist theory and evaluating its applicability to militant group populist rhetoric. In conducting qualitative research utilizing dictionary- and process tracing methodology, I find that militant group use of populist rhetoric differs from electoral populism and warrants further study. My temporal analysis of militant group social media posts and militant group activity over time explores militant engagement in populist rhetoric and identifies ties between different manifestations of populist rhetoric. As usage of populist rhetoric and civil conflict increase, analysis of how actors in civil conflict engage in populist rhetoric is crucial.

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"I'm taking a break from researching and I'll keep going tomorrow morning." - Gavriella Bader

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Introduction:

Thousands crowded into the stadium in Mobile, Alabama. The sun was slowly setting on the bay when Donald J. Trump addressed the mass of attendees at an August rally, one year ahead of the 2016 United States Presidential Election. The mass turnout and overwhelmingly positive reception of Trump marked a turning point for many, legitimizing Trump's campaign and signaling his political potential. Trump is one of the many political leaders whose populist language has garnered mass followings and large popular support with his promises to "drain the swamp," addressing elite corruption and rectifying political and economic inequalities to protect the interests of rural, blue collar America. Over the past decade, politicians across Europe and in Latin America have utilized populist rhetoric, amassing large scale approval from their bases and mobilizing thousands towards electoral action. Populist rhetoric has led to political success for parties such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, and outgoing Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro (Champion, 2022).

As populist rhetoric has increased in prominence and effectiveness, populism has become increasingly studied in academic literature. However, the field largely examines populism in electoral contexts and thus study of engagement in populist rhetoric by actors in civil conflict is lacking. Militant groups remain underrepresented in populism studies, with the existing literature focusing on links between far right populism and militancy (Stankov 2021; Berlet, 1995), and government attempts to combat militant populism in Indonesia (Mietzner, 2018; Wilson, 2014). Despite the significant incentives of militant groups to engage in populist rhetoric, there is no literature assessing militant articulations of populist rhetoric or evaluating the form that such

rhetoric takes. To understand the full reach of populism, as well as contemporary militant rhetoric, we must examine how populist rhetoric impacts mobilization of militant actors in contexts of civil conflict. A deeper understanding of populism as a mobilizing rhetorical force allows for the understanding of contemporary militant group recruitment, driving an analysis of group aims through the study of goals underlying engagement in populist rhetoric.

Based on electoral manifestations of populism, I construct a theoretical framework for populist rhetoric within civil conflict. Identifying mobilization of recruitment and support as a motivation for militant groups to engage in populism, I break populist rhetoric into mobilizing elements to examine how populist language can lead to increased mobilization. In utilizing process tracing methodology, I build a comprehensive timeline of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) militant group in my case study of the Syrian Civil War between 2017 and 2018, and examine the relationship between group activity and engagement in populist appeals. I analyze how my qualitative observations depart from traditional articulations of populism and present an evaluation of populism as used by militant groups, an area thus far understudied.

What Makes a Populist?

Literature Review of Populism Study

Populism and its presence in politics is increasing globally, most prominently in Western democracies and South America, leading to a rise in study of populism in these regions (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Nyenhuis, 2019). Despite a lack of examination of militant group use of populism in the literature, I believe populism is equally accessible to militant groups as a communication style that can mobilize individuals and increase militant group capacity. Militant group capacity has a significant impact on the trajectory and nature of civil conflicts. Group size can impact not only the capacity of a militant group, but can also have implications on their strategic decisions. Militant group size has been found to impact who groups fight and group survival, which has implications on conflict length (Gade et al., 2019; Phillips, 2014). As such, the success or failure of militant groups to mobilize individuals can have a significant impact on who they choose to fight, their survival, and the length of the civil conflict.

Conceptualizations of Militant Group Capacity

Mobilization is an important element and aspect of militant group capacity. It can signal popular faith in militant group effectiveness, capacity to govern, and ability to win a conflict. To increase capacity and gain credibility, militant groups attempt to mobilize support and recruitment among individuals, engaging in appeals and incentives to do so. Militant

mobilization often represents a collective action problem, in which individuals may benefit from collective gains even if they don't contribute to the fighting effort. Individuals may face high costs for mobilizing, and can avoid these costs by choosing not to contribute to efforts while still benefiting from the collective gains, which is known as free riding. Thus, in attempting to mobilize individuals, militant groups aim to lower collective action costs while raising the costs of free riding. Bosi and Porta conceptualize two dimensions of incentives: selective incentives including power, economic benefits, and status, and collective incentives including identity, solidarity, and character (2012). Selective benefits increase incentives to mobilize while limiting access to benefits to those who contribute to militant efforts, raising the cost of free riding. (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008). Selective incentives can include financial payments to militant fighters, access to loot, gifts of land, or promotion to positions of authority (Lichbach, 1994). While selective incentives provide benefits for participation, social sanctions created by a militant group or community aim to increase mobilization by raising the costs for non-participation (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008).

Collective benefits, such as ideology and identity, feature less material appeals, focusing more heavily on messaging. Messaging is often a less expensive and more accessible mobilization tactic for militant groups, and attracts more committed ideological recruits over opportunistic recruits seeking material gain (Wood, 2008). Ideology and social identity can be utilized instrumentally to form effective appeals towards mobilization for militant groups, with the strength of the social identity group determining the effectiveness of mobilization (Gurr, 1993; Curtis and Sindre, 2019). Shared conceptualizations of identity can reduce collective action problems (Bedford, 2009; Polletta and Jasper, 2001, Fominaya, 2010) or contribute to structural divides between populations within a state that allow for the mobilization of groups

against each other (Fearon and Laitin, 2003). In my study, I will analyze the impact of populist rhetoric in militant group public messaging, and evaluate its impact on mobilization and group capacity through the case of HTS social media rhetoric as a party in Syrian Civil War

Two prominent mobilization theories are the competing theories of relative deprivation theory and group mobilization theory. Relative deprivation theory argues that perceived inequality is the primary driver for mobilization, whereas group mobilization theory posits that perceived political opportunity forms the basis for mobilization (Gurr, 1993). Appeal-driven mobilization can utilize both relative deprivation theory (RDT) and group mobilization theory (GMT), as articulations of inequality and opportunity both represent mobilizing rhetoric. However, resource mobilization theory (RMT) is not compatible with appeal-driven mobilization, arguing that grievances alone are not sufficient to spark mobilization, necessitating changes in opportunity or resources to explain mobilization (Jenkins, 1983). In studying Islamist militant groups, I evaluate the impact of Islamist mobilization as a product of rational choice theory, basing Islamist mobilization in the appeal mobilization of RDT and GMT, and the material mobilization of RMT. (Wiktorowicz, 2002; Meijer, 2005). Here, I explore how theories of grievance and rhetorical framing explain the mobilizing capacity of populist appeals.

Understanding Populism

Where prior studies of populism primarily approached populism as a political ideology (Mudde, 2004) or a political strategy (Weyland, 2001), there has been a shift in the field towards study of populism as a feature of rhetoric, evaluating populism as a characteristic of political speech (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). The evaluation of populism as a communication style

allows for the application of a discursive and stylistic lens, resulting in identification of common themes, target audiences, and proscribed solutions across populist appeals of different movements (Brubaker, 2017; Aslandis, 2016). This emerging segment of the field is outlining how populism can be conceptualized and studied as a political rhetoric (Aslanidis 2017; Hameleers and Vliegenthart, 2019; Gründl, 2022; Fahey, 2021).

While conceptualizations of populism vary, most definitions agree on common themes: the centricity of "the people", the advocacy of their political sovereignty, and the identification of an "corrupt elite" class as a threat to the interests and rule of the people (Mudde, 2004; Gründl, 2022). Depending a populist group's aims, definitions of "the people", "the corrupt elite", and the ideal resolution of the moral and political conflict vary. Populist rhetoric that includes these themes has been utilized by leaders to mobilize citizens of a state against a perceived elite class or party (Mudde, 2004; Laclau, 2005). Thus, studying populism in the context of communication allows for the formation of conclusions about the mobilizing capacity of populist appeals

Rhetorical features found in populist appeals include inequality grievances, in-group definitions, or out-group definitions. Populist appeals often present grievances of inequality, identifying an inequality and presenting it as a collective grievance (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Populist rhetoric frames *grievances of inequality* by identifying a perceived elite or ruling class targeted as the source of the grievance, an out-group that I refer to as the "*target of culpability*" (Bonikowski and Zhang, 2020). Additionally, populist appeals claim to represent and defend "the people ", and as such, define an *in-group* for which to advocate (Obradovic et al., 2020).

Diverse conceptualizations of populism have evolved in the field to allow for the capture and study of different manifestations of populist elements of communication. Categorical analysis of populism describes the content-based study of how elements of populist rhetoric may

present in communication (de Vreese et al., 2018). The identification of populist "reliance of charisma and group-related commonsense" and "appeal to moral sentiments," allows for the study of procedural characteristics of populism in addition to the content of populist rhetoric (Krämer, 2014). Other conceptualizations of populism highlight the impact of political polarization on the formation of in-group definition (Hameleers and Vliegenthart, 2019). Populism is not restricted from either end of the political spectrum, making populist rhetoric an accessible appeal strategy for groups with differing ideologies (Rooduijn et al., 2012).

Defining Populism

Populism has been effective in movements through its advocacy for the return of power to the people, the righting of economic and political disparities, and strengthened representation of in-group interests in governance. I define populist rhetoric as containing three elements: grievances of inequality, targets of culpability, and in-group definition. Grievances of inequality are not the only content present in populist appeals, but are the primary and most effective messages to communicate in populist appeals. The three elements that I identify appear most saliently and consistently within populist appeals, strengthening their effectiveness in mobilization of individuals.

Populism as a communication style is widely available to many parties, even those who do not identify as populist, and similarly is not tied to either the right or left side of the political spectrum (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). I anticipate groups who engage strategically in populist appeals for mobilization will utilize different amounts of populism at different times. It is

important to consider how the interests of different parties impact the "amounts" or articulations

of populism. For example, state forces in a civil conflict may engage in populist rhetoric of

in-group definition but omit inequality grievances, since they as the governing force have

incentive to deny the presence of inequality that may mobilize citizens against them. Militant

groups with no clearly defined in-group may utilize targets of culpability messaging including

inequality grievances to mobilize support for their conflict against the government. As such, I

define populist rhetoric as including two out of three of the identified elements of populism

above. Parties who engage in populist rhetoric in greater frequency are expected to be more

populist in nature, espousing populist ideology not only in mobilization efforts but in the core of

group ideology. This study aims to examine the impact of populist rhetoric on mobilization

Theoretical Framework of Populism

Populism has a clear impact on political and electoral mobilization. As discussed above, theories underlying the effectiveness of populist mobilization fit with existing theories of mobilization in the literature. In harnessing multiple aspects of effective mobilizing communication, populist rhetoric strengthens its mobilizing capacity. Populism has proven effective in electoral and political mobilization and is an accessible strategy to groups regardless of their capacity, making it an accessible strategic communication tool for militant groups to use in mobilization.

Mobilization in civil conflict constitutes a significant collective action problem for militant groups due to its high costs. Within civil conflict, joining or providing support to militant actors can incur significant costs of safety, government protection, or one's own life. At the same time, militant mobilization can produce public goods, from which both mobilized and non-mobilized individuals non-selectively benefit. Thus, there is great incentive for individuals to free ride, benefiting from the mobilization of others while avoiding the costs of mobilizing themselves (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008). To increase mobilization, militant groups must overcome the collective action problem by lowering the benefit of free riding, appealing to shared grievances, and increasing the costs of free riding. As such, Humphreys and Weinstein theorize that effective mobilization is achieved by providing selective incentives to individuals who mobilize, targeting shared grievances, and introducing social sanctions for free riders (2008). In my study, I examine the mobilization capacity of grievances in appeals rather than material incentives or social sanctions. However, militant groups also can impact mobilization

through material-based manipulation of the costs and benefits for free riding. I will explore these alternate explanations for changes in militant group capacity below.

Articulation of Grievance

Grievances have been found to impact the decisions of individuals to mobilize and join militant groups. As such, perceived marginalization or inequality that strengthens individual grievances increases the likelihood of mobilization (Humphries and Weinstein, 2008). The messaging content of populist appeals focuses on inequality and collective grievances of defined in-groups (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Populist rhetoric utilizes grievances of inequality messaging, in which it identifies inequalities in resources or power between a group or individual and a defined "other," utilizing relative deprivation theory (RDT) to mobilize towards action (Kawakami and Dion, 1995; Korpi, 1974). Relative deprivation theory posits that mobilization is primarily driven by perceived inequality (Gurr, 1993). As such, I theorize that populist appeals will make individuals more likely to mobilize due to their inequality-focused messaging.

A prominent and salient grievance of inequality utilized in populist messaging is economic inequality. Economic inequality has been found as a political motivator that impacts electoral behavior (Inglehart and Norris, 2016) and the likelihood of individual mobilization in support of militant groups (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008). Grievances such as economic deprivation can be powerful in mobilizing citizens towards action and motivating civil unrest (Regan and Norton, 2005). When articulations of these grievances focus on the economic inequality between a general population and an elite or ruling class, they take on a populist

nature (Rico et al., 2020). Populist appeals to economic inequality identify a socio-economic in-group, utilizing economic suppression or hardship as a shared social definition (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Additionally, identification and critique of economic inequality often delegitimizes the governance in place, which can aid mobilization against the government (O'Connor, 2017). As such, militant group engagement in populist appeals featuring grievances of economic inequality will be effective in mobilizing individuals to join militant groups.

Other grievances of inequality can feature political or identity-based inequality (inequality on the basis of religion, race, or ethnicity). Studies find populist rhetoric and attitudes mobilize individuals towards electoral participation, mitigating political inequality stemming from economic inequality (Kostov, 2020). As perceived political ineffectiveness has been found to mobilize support for populist parties, populist messaging harnessing political ineffectiveness should see successful mobilization (Magni, 2017). Populist messaging that engages in grievances of political inequality utilizes perceptions of widespread political ineffectiveness due to elite monopolization of political structures to mobilize individuals. In democracies, this can result in increased distrust in traditional political structures such as the election processes or the court system (Norris et al., 2019). Similar to grievances of economic inequality, grievances of political inequality feature an inclusive in-group definition open to individuals who perceive political inequality. Inclusive in-group definitions give populist appeals greater mobilization reach as they appeal to a more open collective identity. At the same time, grievances of inequality that appeal to exclusive in-group definitions have strong mobilization potential due to the presence of pre-existing collective identity.

Grievances of inequality can also be based on religious or ethnic inequality or persecution, which have more exclusive in-group definitions. Populist appeals utilizing these

identity-based grievances seek to mobilize specific populations, often identifying religious or ethnic groups as the in-group. Religious and ethnic groups possess pre-existing collective identities that are experienced in addressing and solving collective action problems within ritual practice and community (Bedford, 2009). Ethnic groups constitute organized populations with strong collective identities who have been found to mobilize against ascriptive discrimination (Fearon et al., 2007). As such, religious or ethnic groups should see higher rates of mobilization to appeals based on grievances of inequality or persecution against their in-group. As religious and ethnic populations engage in mobilization towards both peaceful and violent collective action against perceived inequality, I theorize that populist appeals engaging in identity-based populism will be successful in mobilizing individuals to join militant groups.

H1: Militant groups that engage in articulation of grievances within populist rhetoric will see higher mobilization

In-Group Definition

Populism aims to represent and achieve the will of "the people", necessitating the definition of an in-group population who ideally holds sovereignty and political control. Obradović sees this as a natural progression of human tendency to construct identity in relation to groups, defining the world in terms of division between "us" and "them" (2020). The construction of an in-group and prioritization of its grievances reflects social identity theory, which argues that establishment of positive differences between an in-group and an outgroup

increases self-esteem and self-image of the in-group. (Turner et al., 1979). This can result in increased individual mobilization towards action on behalf of the group.

Additionally, populism strengthens the effectiveness of mobilizing appeals by constructing or defining a collective identity and targeting appeals towards this identity group. Collective identity helps populations overcome the collective action problem, increasing mobilization toward collective action due to social obligation (Polletta and Jasper, 2001), the potential of pre-existing communal cooperation (Bedford, 2009), and a sense of group cohesion (Fominaya, 2010). Populist rhetoric's inclusion of these group-based appeals harness social identity theory and collective identity theory to identify specific populations as "the people", and appeal directly to them (Ghose et al., 2008; Anduiza et al., 2019). Populist in-group definitions vary according to their goals, from identity based in-group definitions of citizenship, religion, ethnicity, or shared values (Krämer, 2014). As the in-group definition characteristic of populist rhetoric mobilizes individuals towards collective action through collective identity, militant groups engaging in populist appeals will see greater mobilization.

H2: Militant groups that engage in in-group articulations within populist rhetoric will see higher mobilization

Target Of Culpability

The definition of a target of culpability and an out-group of elites constitutes the definition of the "them" in the "us versus them" framework of natural division that Obradović

discusses (2020). Definition of an external target of blame is effective at generating anger among individuals, which motivates action against the defined threat (Magni, 2017) or rectification of a perceived injustice (van Zomeren et al., 2012). At the same time, utilization of a vague target of culpability that does not mobilize against clearly identified out-groups still allows for the shift of blame away from the defined in-group. Target of culpability as a mobilizing element can lead to increased recruitment to combat externally identified threats.

Additionally, through the identification of a target of culpability, groups shift blame away from themselves, exonerating themselves as the blameless representatives of the people (Vasilopoulou et al., 2013). Militant groups may engage in blame-shifting by targeting the government as responsible for inequalities or other groups as responsible for civilian casualties, avoiding the political costs of engaging in violence (Abrahms and Conrad, 2017). At the same time, groups gain credibility for taking responsibility for large and violent attacks against opponents. Identification of an external target of culpability strengthens the mobilization effectiveness of populist rhetoric, and thus I theorize that militant groups engaging in populist rhetoric will see higher mobilization towards recruitment. In turn, this will lead to larger group capacity

H3: Militant groups that engage in articulations of targets of culpability within populist rhetoric will see higher mobilization

Based on my theoretical framework on populist language, I theorize parties utilizing populism will see larger recruitment

H4: Militant groups who engage in populist language are more likely to see higher mobilization

As discussed, the use of populist rhetoric is not limited to groups with specific ideologies or with specific capacities; Use of populist rhetoric is accessible to all groups.

H5: Militant group size or ideology will not make use of populist language more or less likely

Populism and Social Media

Engagement in populist rhetoric is accessible to all groups, and thus not every group who engages in populist rhetoric is a populist group (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). In this way, studying social media posts captures phenomena that the study of manifestos would not, allowing for the examination of a correlation between populist rhetoric and outcomes. Additionally, a study of militant group manifestos would not allow for an analysis of changes in militant group appeals over time. While Krämer argues that populism present stylistically in communication is reflective of ideological populism of the communicator, populism's accessibility as a rhetorical mobilizer incentivizes groups without populist leanings to engage in populist rhetoric. Thus, a survey of social media communications allows for the study of the impact of populist rhetoric on mobilization for both non-populist and populist groups.

Social media has been effective in contributing to the success of populist parties in elections and in growing their popularity (Hameleers and Vliegenthart, 2019; Krämer, 2014). Recently, social media appeals have become a hallmark of populist parties in Western elections

(Gerbaudo, 2018). Social media enables the bypass of traditional media, allowing communicators to access and address individuals they otherwise would not be able to (Krämer, 2014). As populism is concerned with the mobilization of "the people", social media with its vast reach toward ordinary people is an effective platform to engage in populist appeals. Thus, I theorize that militant groups are incentivized to engage in populist appeals through social media, except in cases when social media access or spread of information is restricted by the central government.

However, I anticipate that studying populist appeals through the lens of social media will alter the form and explicitness of populist rhetoric. Social media rarely includes explicit calls to mobilize, including more self-promotion and operation description (Loyle and Bestvater, 2019). Thus, populism expressed in social media will not explicitly mobilize a defined in-group against a target of culpability due to a grievance of inequality, as our definition of populism would lead us to expect. Rather, we will see populist rhetoric underlying posts promoting militant groups and operation descriptions, which will require an exploration of how populist rhetoric can be identified in social media posts.

H6: Populist rhetoric on social media are less likely to include explicit calls to action

Alternate Explanations

While I focus on militant group appeals as a potential driver of mobilization in my evaluation of the impact of populist rhetoric on militant group capacity, there are several material

factors that may impact individual mobilization. These include selective incentives for those who mobilize and social sanctions for those who do not, increasing the benefits for collective action and raising the costs of free-riding (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008). Within the greed model, material incentives are considered powerful mobilizing forces for militant group recruitment (Regan and Norton, 2005).

In addition to selective incentives, alternate theories of mobilization include ideological mobilization, solidaristic mobilization, kinship mobilization, and opportunity-based mobilization. Ideological motivations have been found to drive individual mobilization towards militancy through ideological beliefs and thus constitute an alternate explanation for militant group capacity (Bosi and Porta, 2012). Solidaristic mobilization is driven by the motivation to defend or avenge one's perceived community (Bosi and Porta, 2012), which includes mobilization against perceived threat and mobilization in pursuit of revenge (Tezcur, 2015). Mobilization theories of kinship or community ties between individuals explain the mobilization of individuals towards groups their relatives belong to (Maza et al., 2020). Finally, opportunity-based explanations for mobilization theorize that participation in militant groups could provide individuals with opportunities for social and economic mobility they would not otherwise have access to, motivating them towards mobilization to achieve advancement (Teczur, 2014; Gurr, 1993).

As I evaluate the impact of populist rhetoric on group capacity, it is important to consider the potential converse relationship between my independent and dependent variables. Capacity factors of militant groups can have implications on whether or not individuals choose to mobilize to support them. Those mobilized by the potential for instrumental change are more likely to pursue stronger groups with higher capacity in order to achieve the change they desire (Bosi and

Porta, 2012). Credibility of groups has also been found to increase mobilization of individuals to

join them, with groups with larger capacity seeing greater credibility (Tezcur, 2015).

Methods

In my evaluation of militant group articulation of populism, I employ elements of dictionary research design and process tracing to identify manifestations of populist rhetoric that fall outside my framework, construct a coding ontology, and qualitatively evaluate the relationship between populist rhetoric and group capacity. First, I conduct a survey of 500 social media communications from the Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) Syrian militant group. This body of survey tweets are selected randomly, occurring in differing months within 2017. In this survey, I identify manifestations of populism and aims of populism that fall outside my initial theoretical framework. I construct a coding ontology to evaluate populism, utilizing deductive theoretical framework and inductive survey findings to outline expected manifestations and aims of populism. I code 1,003 claims spanning from February, 2017 to early May, 2018 to gather data about the frequency of populist manifestation and aims in HTS communications, excluding the 500 survey claims. Utilizing process tracing methodology, I construct a timeline of HTS group activity between February 2017 and May 2018 and qualitatively examine relationships between populist rhetoric and group activity to evaluate populism and group capacity.

Dictionary Research Design

To identify instances of populism, I will create a dictionary of terms that mark populist language. Dictionaries have been utilized successfully in the identification and study of populist

language within the literature (Hameleers and Vliegenthart, 2020; Fahey, 2021; Aslanidis, 2018; Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016) . Such studies include hand-coded and machine assisted identification of populist language based on constructed dictionaries of populism. Machine learning based on constructed dictionaries have been found to be an applicable method in identifying and studying populist discourse (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016). While there are constructed dictionaries to identify populist media coverage (Hameleers and Vliegenthart, 2020), and presidential campaign discourse (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016; Fahey, 2021), and grassroots mobilization (Aslanidis, 2018), there is no constructed dictionary for the identification of populist language within militant group communication.

The construction of an independent body of indicators to identify populism within civil conflict as used by militant groups is necessary to understand the potential scope of populism and its impact on mobilization. I theorize that militant groups are incentivized to use populism due to the mobilizing capacity of populist language, necessitating the study of militant group populist communication within the contemporary study of populism. To examine the scope and utilization of populist rhetoric by militant groups, I engage in the construction of a dictionary. I survey 500 attack and communication social media posts from accounts associated with the HTS militant group. In this survey, I compiled phrases which characterize, and thus can help identify, instances of populist communication. In completing the survey, I found that the language of populist communication deviated from the expectations I outlined in the theory section. In the following section, I outline ways in which militant group articulations of populism differ from theoretical understandings populist rhetoric in electoral or movement-based contexts.

Process Tracing Research Design

In evaluating the impact of populist rhetoric on group capacity and exploring features of militant populist rhetoric and aims, I utilize a process tracing approach. Process tracing is employed to examine understudied areas by utilizing qualitative case-analysis to produce casual observations (Collier, 2011). While this method has been critiqued for its lack of guiding standards, the inclusion of clear theoretical definitions, research with strong direction, and clear data identification for theory evaluation within process tracing has been found to mitigate these critiques (Ricks and Lui, 2018). Informed by the guidelines suggested for process tracing by Ricks and Lui, I build a clear theoretical framework to inform my hypotheses, establish a comprehensive timeline through which I form causal observations, and thoroughly explore alternate explanations.

I employ the process tracing method to qualitatively evaluate instances and the nature of populist rhetoric against a timeline I construct of group activity, attacks, and size. I utilize this timeline to evaluate my hypotheses regarding purpose, impact, and nature of militant group populist rhetoric. The timeline and social media claims span 2017-2018. The qualitative observations and conclusions I reach constitute one of the first attempts to understand militant engagement in populist appeals.

Case Selection

In my selection of the Syrian civil conflict as a case study for the examination of militant group populist rhetoric, I aim to evaluate a contemporary civil war that allows for the study of

social media communication to evaluate populist rhetoric and alternate explanations for mobilization. The Syrian civil conflict began in 2011 as a conflict against the government. Since then, several Islamist and nationalist militant groups have emerged with different political aims, often clashing with each other in addition to with the government. My study focuses on a later period of the war, concentrating on January 2017 - April 2018, as that was the period in which I had data on militant group social media communications. As a more contemporary case, the Syrian conflict and Syrian militant communications have occurred largely on social media. Study of militant social media communications is unique in that it allows for the study of direct, widespread, and public messaging from militant groups. Social media within civil conflict is a growing area within the literature as its implications on conflicts are examined.

Secondly, the Syrian conflict allows for the testing of my alternate explanations for group capacity. These include militant group establishment of civil administration, foreign state sponsorship, and salient religious identities. Such conditions allow for exploration of the potential interaction between civil administration, religious identity, and militant populist language. Additionally, studying actors in the Syrian conflict allows for the evaluation of militant Islamism and how Islamist militant groups engage in articulations of populism. Finally, as a contemporary civil conflict, the Syrian conflict is occurring in tandem with rising electoral populism in Europe, the United States, and Latin America.While the singular case study of Syria is not sufficient to draw a conclusion on populism as a trend in civil conflict, in studying this contemporary conflict, I can observe if the rise in electoral populism is seeing corresponding increases in civil conflict within Syria. Future studies in militant populism would benefit from utilizing the Syrian civil conflict as a case in which to conduct a multi-group analysis of

populism. Additionally, the Syrian conflict is deserving of increased study as an ongoing conflict with severe regional impact.

Militant Articulations of Populism

In my survey of HTS's social media posts, I found that the group engaged in different articulations of populism than the model I presented based on expectations of populist theory in electoral contexts. In some cases, differences were salient, representing a large departure from the rhetoric of populist actors in electoral and movement-based contexts. In other cases, HTS's rhetoric included elements of populism found in electoral populist rhetoric.

HTS's engagement in populist rhetoric diverges from my theoretical framework in two ways - the form of populist claims, and the purpose for which the group engages in populist language. Regarding form, HTS's posts articulate threats more often than grievances. utilizing more immediate threats confronting civilians to assign blame, establish legitimacy, and mobilize support. Additionally, HTS engages in populist language to describe the necessity of rectification of injustices, and the group's success in achieving rectification. While these aspects of form diverge from my theoretical framework of militant group use of populism, they are still represented within literature as features of populism. Regarding purpose for engagement in populist language, HTS engaged in populism for reasons other than mobilization and recruitment. These purposes included claims of information legitimacy to combat social media imposters as well as governance legitimization, to portray HTS as a viable alternative to the central government for governance. HTS's engagement in populist rhetoric in differing forms

and for different purposes reflect differing choices and priorities of militant groups in war than of populist parties in electoral contexts.

Threats

In many of HTS's social media posts, threats take the place of grievances. Threats have been found to be powerful in mobilization toward collective action (Almeida, 2018). Where threats and grievances were once used interchangeably, the literature has shifted to regard and study the two as distinct phenomena. Where grievances reflect the perception of an inequality or injustice that is less intensely perceived, threats "entail the perception of possible loss", and are felt more intensely (McKane and McCammon, 2018). Within the context of mobilization, threats have been defined as a sub-category of grievance that increases the intensity and urgency of grievances (Bergstrand, 2014). Threat as a mobilizing rhetorical factor within populism is represented in the literature. Although Western electoral populism focuses mainly on grievance, articulations of threats to ethnocultural majorities in the form of immigration have been successful in electoral mobilization (Bonikowski, 2017; Kende and Kriko, 2020). Negative perceptions of out-groups have been tied to threat articulation, having greater impact on mobilizational success than positive perceptions of the in-group. Civil conflict may generate greater negative perception of out-groups than electoral competition, strengthening the effectiveness of threat articulation.

Where literature on Western electoral populist rhetoric features mainly identity and status threats (Bonikowski, 2017; Obradović et al., 2020), within HTS's tweets the threats utilized most often were threats to "religious truth," economic threats, political threats, and threats to life

(military threats). Threats of "religious truth" focused on how other factions distorted the "correct" practice of Islam, characterizing such distortions as "corruption" and "criminality" that threatened the character of civilians and the efforts of HTS to build a monotheistic, Sunni Muslim polity. [1] Economic threats often focused on high stakes economic issues with life-threatening implications, such as the impact of fuel price increases on the ability of citizens to heat their homes. Political threats mainly concerned peace brokering efforts by other parties that HTS saw as a threat to their efforts and the polity they were attempting to build. Finally, threats to life posts articulated the indiscriminate killing of the regime, and high threat of loss of life to those who did not fight or have HTS's protection. This category of threats featured the most within the survey.

H7: Militant groups that engage in articulations of threat within populist rhetoric will see higher mobilization

Rectification of Inequalities

In addition to the presentation of inequalities as grievances discussed in my theoretical framework, HTS describes its rectification of inequalities. Rectification of inequality is represented in the literature on populism, seen as part of the populist effort to legitimize the leadership of one strongman leader or party above all others (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). This leader is presented as the strongest and only option to lead the defense of the in-group's interests, with articulations of past rectifications of inequality as the foundation for their legitimacy. By engaging in rectifications of inequality, HTS attempts to build their legitimacy. These

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[1] Claim ID: TRR2017072667995740

rectifications can take on a militant sense, in which HTS affirms they will engage in jihad to "protect our people and liberate our land"[2]. They can also take on an economic sense, when the group takes steps to rectify economic injustices through the facilitation of humanitarian aid distribution[3] or regulatory oversight of the economy.

H8: Militant groups that engage in articulations of rectification of inequalities within populist rhetoric will see higher mobilization

Legitimization of Information Sources

Within civil conflict, the spread of credible information is decentralized from official sources, with unofficial sources gaining accessibility to participate in credible information spread. Civil conflict can lead to the dismantling or reduced access of official information sources, limiting central control of information spread and reducing a monopoly on credibility. This decentralization presents both an opportunity and a challenge for militant groups. On one hand, they become increasingly credible sources of information, as there is no central monopoly on information invalidating them. At the same time, militant groups become vulnerable to misinformation and impersonation, with other parties attempting to reach and mislead their target audiences.

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[2] Claim ID: TRR2017031770694098
[3] Claim ID: TRR2017073168591091

Within HTS's communication posts, there are instances in which the group identifies such misinformation or impersonation. Many information legitimization or de-legitimization posts feature in-group and out-group definitions as outlined in my theory.

At 2140 GMT on 19 September, Twitter user "Abu-Rayan Ma'sadah" (@alm2sda; user ID 2250316038) tweeted an embedded screenshot of a Telegram post by 'Imad al-Din Mujahid, the group's director of media relations, that reads: "Note: There are dozens of accounts on social media that claim to be affiliated to and supportive of the Tahrir al-Sham Corps. I would like to alert you that it is the official accounts of the [Tahrir al-Sham] Corps that represent the creed, methodology, and behavior of the Corps. Any other account that does not abide by the Corps policies belongs to **unknown people and infiltrators** *who aim to sow* **strife and schism** *among* **Sunnis in Syria**.*"[4]*

This post features in-group definition ("Sunni [Muslims] in Syria"), negative out-group portrayal ("unknown people and infiltrators"), and a more immediate threat in place of a grievance ("strife and schism"). I theorized that militant groups would mainly be incentivized to engage in populist language for mobilization and recruitment. However, HTS's populist articulations diverge from my theory of mobilization to protect group information sources and invalidate other sources.

Legitimization of Governance

At the time of the posting of these social media claims, HTS had control over territory in the Idlib and parts of the Aleppo governorates of Syria, and had established a civil administration

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[4] Claim ID: TRW2017092767330409

(CSIS, 2018; Stanford University, 2021). Below is a map depicting HTS governance in Syria (de Bruijne et al., 2018)

The State of Syria

Introducing ACLED's control map of Syria, a novel examination of the country's changing political violence landscape.

ACLED's new data-driven and expert-based *State of Syria Map* assigns control to conflict actors at the sub-district (nahiya) level of the country. The map denotes each sub-district as contested (colored black), inactive (not currently seen), or controlled by an actor (all other colors). Further, each actor in control of a sub-district is assigned two unique colors to signify whether, while under that group's control, violence has continued to be actively carried out by rival groups or whether the controlled area is generally "inactive." This allows viewers to examine in detail the changing scope, focus, and role of various actors in the Syrian conflict.

July 2018

Comparing the state of territorial control in July 2018 to that of October, it's clear that many sub-districts on the Idleb and Aleppo frontlines of the rebel enclave remained contested (black) despite the Turkish and Russian-backed ceasefire signed in September 2018. Additionally, between July and October, control within the enclave continued to be divided between HTS (dark blues), JTW (turquoise), and a number of smaller opposition groups (light blues).

The regime's campaign to regain IS-contested territory in the southeast was moderately successful between July and October, with Shaqa and Mashnaf sub-districts of As-Sweida (in dark beige in October), brought under its full control. The Dhameer sub-district of Rural Damascus remained contested (in black) as the two sides battled around Tlul al Safa.

October 2018

Data-driven analysis of changes in territorial control and violence between July and October 2018 shows a complex scene of territorial control and contestation across Syria with several significant developments. Overall, the broad trend has been the reduction of areas under contestation between groups, whether QSD versus IS or the regime versus rebel factions, demonstrating that the active fronts of the war have narrowed. Consequently, territorial control and/or stability has increased for several groups, including the regime, QSD, and former Operation Olive Branch factions in Afrin, as they either won territory or as their controlled areas became inactive.

Regime shelling and attempts to contest rebel control of two key frontline Idleb sub-districts, Bennsh and Jisr-Ash-Shugur, drastically decreased in October due to the ceasefire, changing their status from contested (black) to rebel controlled but active (medium blue).

The Coalition and QSD campaign to defeat IS forces in Al-Hasakeh and Deir-ez-Zor provinces has steadily progressed. Important status changes have occurred in the sub-districts of Markada and Sur as they went from being contested (in black) to fully under QSD control (in dark red). Areas contested by IS now only remain in a handful of sub-districts of eastern Deir-ez-Zor, with the group no longer controlling any territory in Al-Hasakeh.

Notable Status Changes

Sub-District	July 2018	October 2018
Badama	Contested	Opposition Rebels (Syria)
Jisr-Ash-Shugur	Contested	Opposition Rebels (Syria)
Mashnaf	Contested	QSD: Syrian Democratic Forces
Markada	Contested	Military Forces of Syria (2000-)
Shaqa	Contested	Military Forces of Syria (2000-)
Sur	Contested	QSD: Syrian Democratic Forces

Control Status

- Military Forces of Syria (2000-)
- Military Forces of Syria (2000-) (Inactive)
- HTS: Hayat Tahrir al Sham
- HTS: Hayat Tahrir al Sham (Inactive)
- JTW: National Liberation Front
- Opposition Rebels (Syria)
- Opposition Rebels (Syria) (Inactive)
- Operation Euphrates Shield
- Operation Euphrates Shield (Inactive)
- Operation Olive Branch
- Operation Olive Branch (Inactive)
- QSD: Syrian Democratic Forces
- QSD: Syrian Democratic Forces (Inactive)
- Military Forces of Israel (2009-) (Inactive)
- Contested

* This map will be released on a periodic basis, and a methodological piece is forthcoming.

Posts of group legitimization of governance reflect the desire of the group to establish legitimacy in their governance, even surpassing the legitimacy of the central government. HTS engages in many claims of group legitimization of governance, most of which outline social

services offered by the civil administration and do not contain populist language.This can be seen in the claim below:

*At 1156 GMT on 10 October, YouTube user "Wikalat Iba'" uploaded a 3-minute 31-second video bearing the logo of the Iba' News Agency titled "Controlling the Prices of Basic Goods in the Liberated North." It charges that **"greedy" merchants** have **increased the prices of "fuel and sugar"** across the "liberated north." In interviews, two officials in **the group's "economic bureau" say the group has established "distribution centers" for natural gas tanks and sugar, and is monitoring merchants**[5]*

Within this claim, there is a negatively defined out-group (greedy merchants), and a discussion of the group's efforts to rectify the subtly outlined threat of lack of access to fuel and sugar through the establishment of distribution centers and monitoring. Description of the rectification of injustices by way of civil administration or military action can be utilized to legitimate governance of the group.

Data

For my independent variable, I use data from the United States Government featuring translated claims from social media sources affiliated with militant groups. This dataset features two main categories of posts: attack and communications. These attack claims detail any combat the group engaged in, who and where they were fighting, and often detail weaponry and casualty numbers. Where attack posts detail attacks or fighting the group engages in, communication posts convey ideological messaging, provide operational updates, and include calls to mobilize.

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[5] Claim ID: TRW2017101666272522

In conducting a survey of attack and communication posts from HTS, I observed populist rhetoric to be largely present in the communication posts. My group-level analysis of HTS's attack and communication claims will allow me to form more robust observations of how and why populism is utilized by the militant group. For my dependent variable, I utilize reports, research, and think tank pieces on militant group activity to build a comprehensive timeline of group activity.

HTS Group - Level Analysis

I conduct a group-level study of HTS communication and attack claims to examine how my theoretical framework and my survey findings manifest within militant communications. HTS's data contains both attack and communication claims, allowing me to observe the full extent of populism present in group social media posts. I produce a dataset of populist type and populist purpose within HTS claims. In this dataset, I code each claim based on the presence of elements of my theoretical framework (in-group definition, target of culpability, grievance), survey findings (threats and rectification of inequality) as well as purpose of populism (mobilization, information security, legitimization of governance). I utilize examples of rhetoric from my survey to construct the coding ontology. In conducting a lagged-time regression model between this constructed dataset and a dataset of HTS attacks, I observe the relationship between populism use and group capacity. I also draw important conclusions on the purposes for engagement in populist rhetoric by militant groups.

To examine the impact of populist rhetoric on militant group capacity, I utilize attacks as a proxy for capacity. Groups claim attacks on differing targets in their social media posts. These attack claims are a valid proxy for group capacity because they signal group strength in numbers,

and thus are tied to group recruitment and size. Size within terrorist groups has been found to impact the number of attacks conducted by the group (Clauset and Gleditsch, 2012). I expect that larger groups with greater capacity will conduct more attacks than smaller groups. However, usage of data based on militant claims has limitations due to differing incentives of militant groups to lie when claiming or denying responsibility for attacks (Kearns et al., 2014).

Results

Exploration of Militant Populist Rhetoric: Manifestations of Populist Rhetoric

I began by evaluating communication type, separating the claims into attack claims and communication claims. Figure 1 below displays my findings. In my analysis of 1,003 claims, I found that communication claims constituted over half of the claims, as portrayed in Figure 1 below. Much of the DOD data on militant group social media activity only includes attack claims for other groups in the Syrian Civil War. Based on my findings of high frequency of communication claims per 1,000 claims, I find communication claims to be significant in understanding the operations and activity of a militant group.
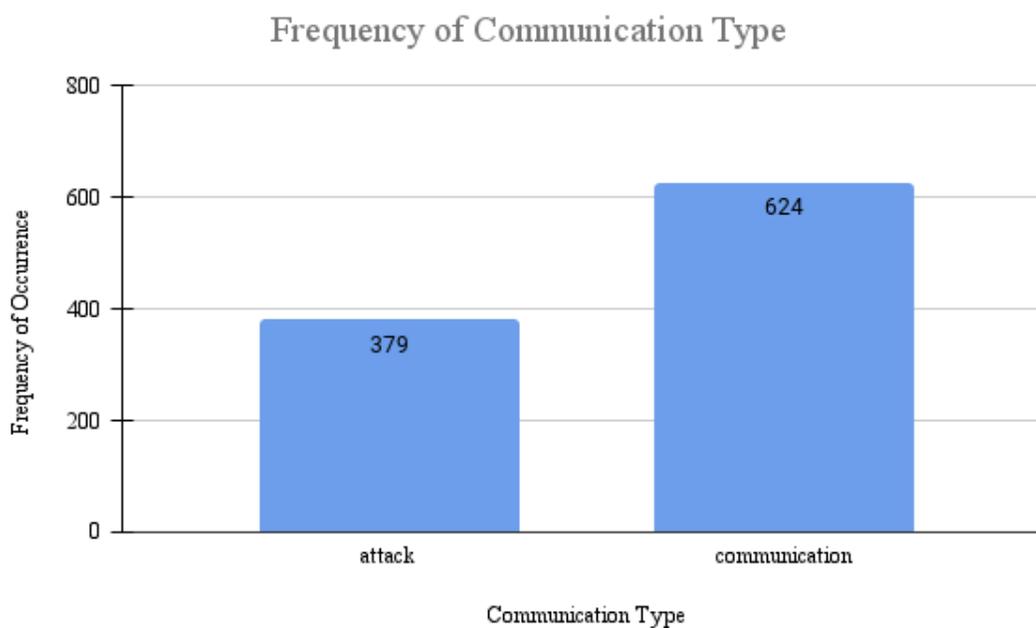
Figure 1. Frequency of Communication Type

Then, I analyzed the amount of populist rhetoric I found present in each communication type. Figure 2 displays manifestations of populism per communication type. In my evaluation, I found that while communication type does not seem to impact the amount of target of culpability (target_of_culp) or grievance of inequality (grievance_of_ineq articulation, the frequency of in-group definition (in_group_def), threat (threat), and rectification of inequality (rectif_of_ineq) vary significantly between communication and attack claims. These findings are presented in Figure 2 below. Within the 1,003 claims I coded, communication claims included in-group definitions 15 times as frequently as attack claims and threats 8 times as frequently as attack claims. However, attack claims only featured a slightly higher frequency of target of culpability articulation, and did not include any grievances of inequality. Articulations of rectifications of inequality are nearly twice as frequent in attack claims as in communication claims. Based on my analysis of manifestations of populism across communication types, I strengthen my conclusion that communication claims are integral in evaluating and understanding militant use of populism.

Manifestations of Populism Per Communication Type
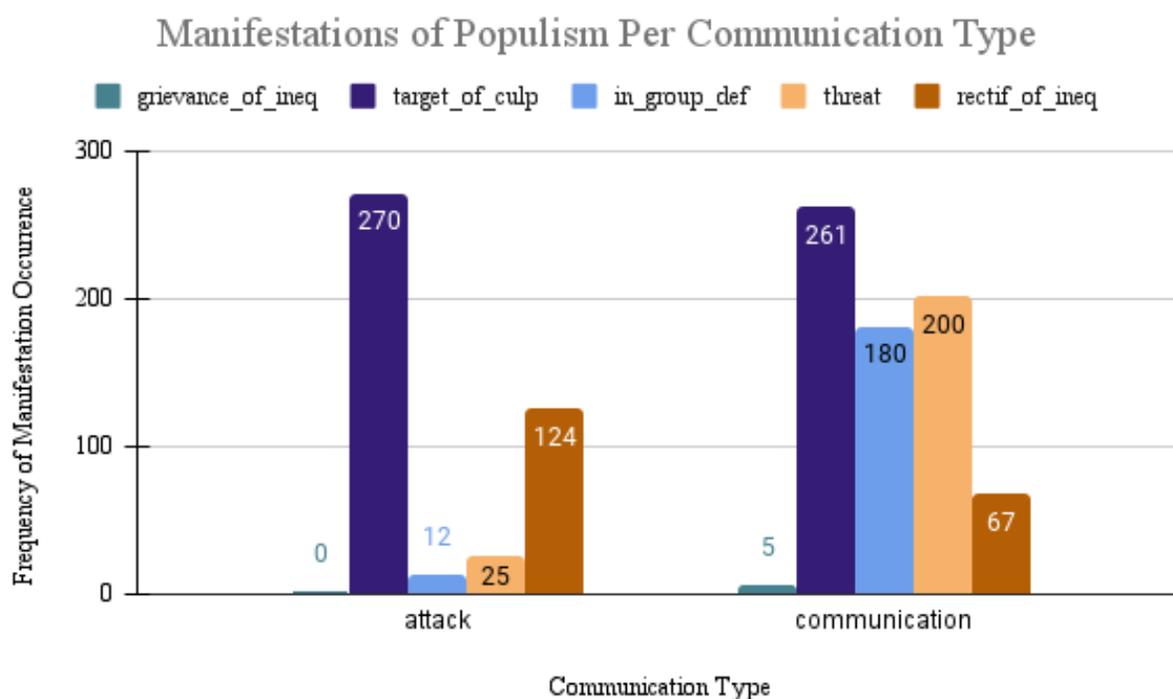
Figure 2. Manifestations of Populism Per Communication Type

To understand potential correlations between articulations of populism, I constructed a table of correlation coefficients. These coefficients are displayed in Table 3 below. While there are no statistically significant positive or negative relationships between any of the manifestations, analysis of the relative differences in correlation coefficients can help develop an understanding of which manifestations HTS is most likely or unlikely to articulate in the same claim. In my theoretical framework, I focus on the impact of articulated manifestations of populist rhetoric on group capacity, overlooking the potential for articulated manifestations to impact the likelihood of articulations of other manifestations. In this growing area of populism study, it is important to study the relationship between different aspects of populist communication, evaluating beyond the labeling of parties or speech as populist.

	grievance_of_ineq	target_of_culp	in_group_def	threat	rectif_of_ineq
grievance_of_ineq	.	0.009940696649	0.07348182336	0.02977518889	0.03772009842
target_of_culp	.	.	0.0114390052	0.1665832755	0.1215904465
in_group_def	.	.	.	0.3699916267	-0.02993187427
threat	.	.	.		-0.07162341504
rectif_of_ineq	.	.	.		

Table 1: Correlation Coefficients Between Manifestations

Exploration of Militant Populist Rhetoric: Aims of Populist Rhetoric

In evaluating the frequency of claim aims across attack and communication claims, I found that all three aims of mobilization, legitimization of information (legit_of_info), and legitimization of governance (legit_of_govern) were articulated more frequently in communication claims. This analysis is displayed below in Figure 3. Legitimization of governance, an aim I identified inductively during my initial claim survey, saw the biggest difference in frequency between attack and communication claims. Additionally, the legitimization of governance aim featured most frequently across the body of claims.

While I constructed most of my theoretical framework around militant group mobilization of resources and support, explicit mobilization and recruitment did not feature frequently in my body of claims. These findings support *Hypothesis 6,* that populist rhetoric on social media is less likely to include explicit calls to action. Across the 1,003 claims, there were instances of explicit recruitment messaging and calls to action, but these claims only constitute about 2.8% of all claims.
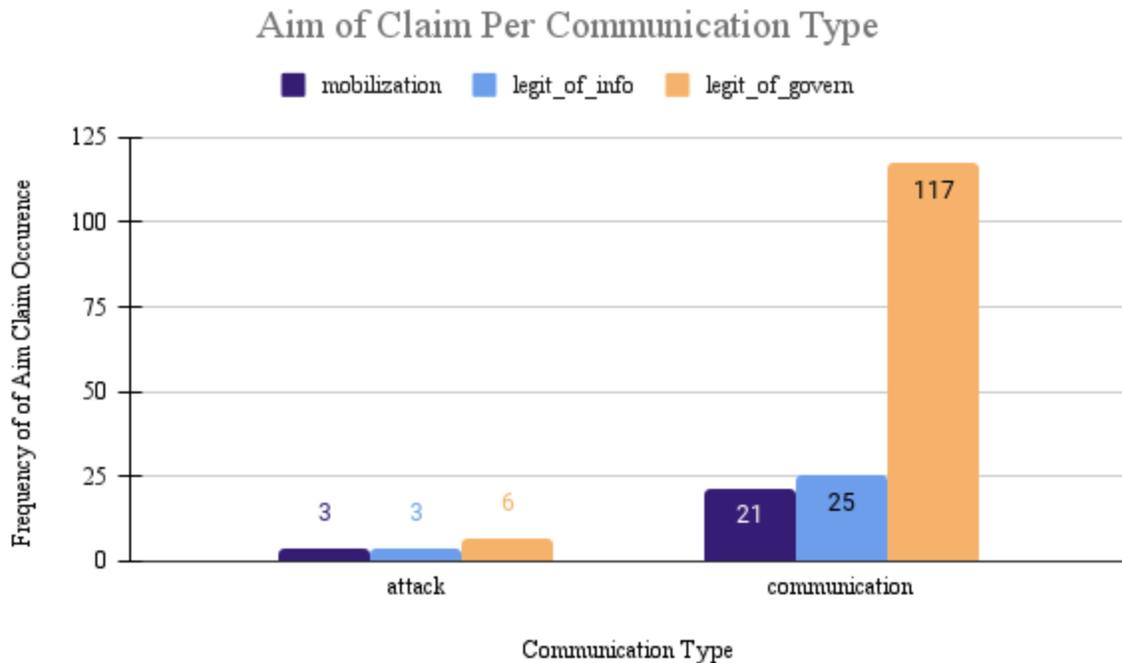
Figure 3. Aim of Claim per Communication Type

I began my assessment of the relationship between aims and manifestations of populist rhetoric by evaluating the correlation between the two. Table 2 displays the correlation coefficients of aims and manifestations of populist rhetoric. While there are no significant positive or negative correlations between aims and manifestations, in comparing correlation coefficients to each other, we can assess which aims and manifestations may be more closely related than others. For example, rectification of inequality and legitimization of government features a relatively large positive correlation, while mobilization and target of culpability feature a relatively large negative correlation. From this, we can conclude that legitimization of government claims are likely to include rectifications of inequality, while mobilization claims are unlikely to include target of culpability. In drawing conclusions on which manifestations are

most likely to be present in claims with specific aims, we can predict usage of populist language by groups depending on their aims and needs.

	grievance of ineq	target of culp	in-group def	threat ▲	rectif of ineq
legit_of_govern	0.05980837132	-0.2568174337	0.07270895144	-0.05493839646	0.08929395585
mobilization	-0.01110487494	-0.08775665194	0.05633796286	-0.005807463492	-0.04286907791
legit_of_info	-0.0120192655	-0.02215413119	-0.02109083628	0.06882033056	-0.03612003963

Table 2: Correlation Coefficients Between Manifestations and Aims

In Figures 4-6, I continued my evaluation on the relationship between a claim's inclusion of an aim and frequency of each manifestation of populism. The results presented in these figures display very little positive relationship between a claim's inclusion of an aim and a claim's inclusion of manifestations of populism. The aim with the highest positive impact on inclusion of manifestations is legitimization of government.
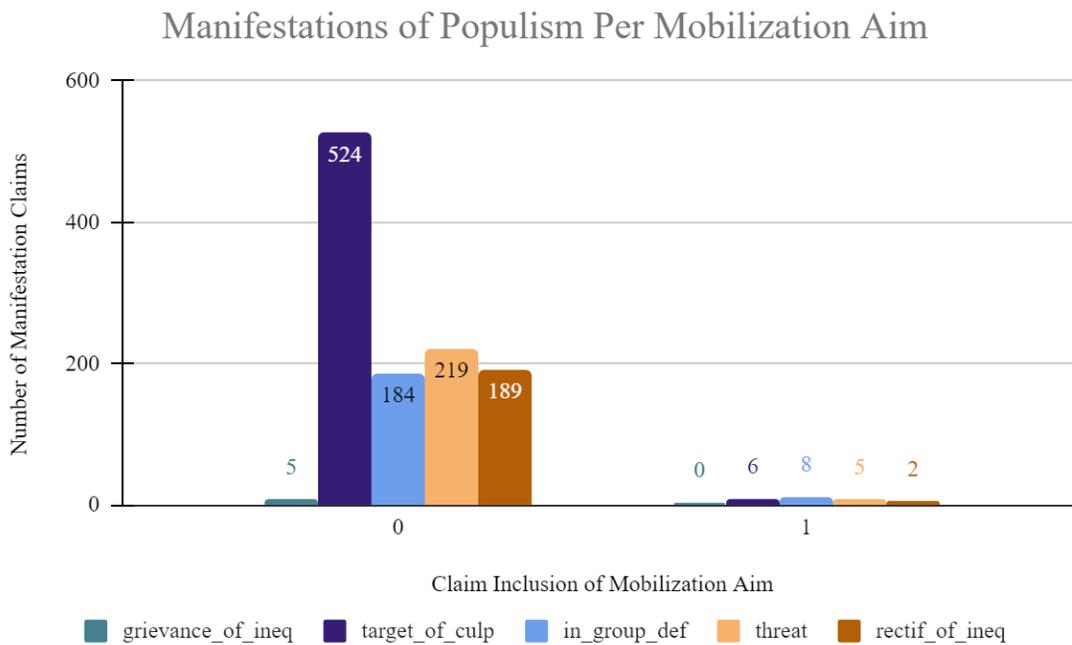
Figure 4. Manifestations of Populism Per Mobilization Aim

Manifestations of Populism Per Legitimization of Information Aim
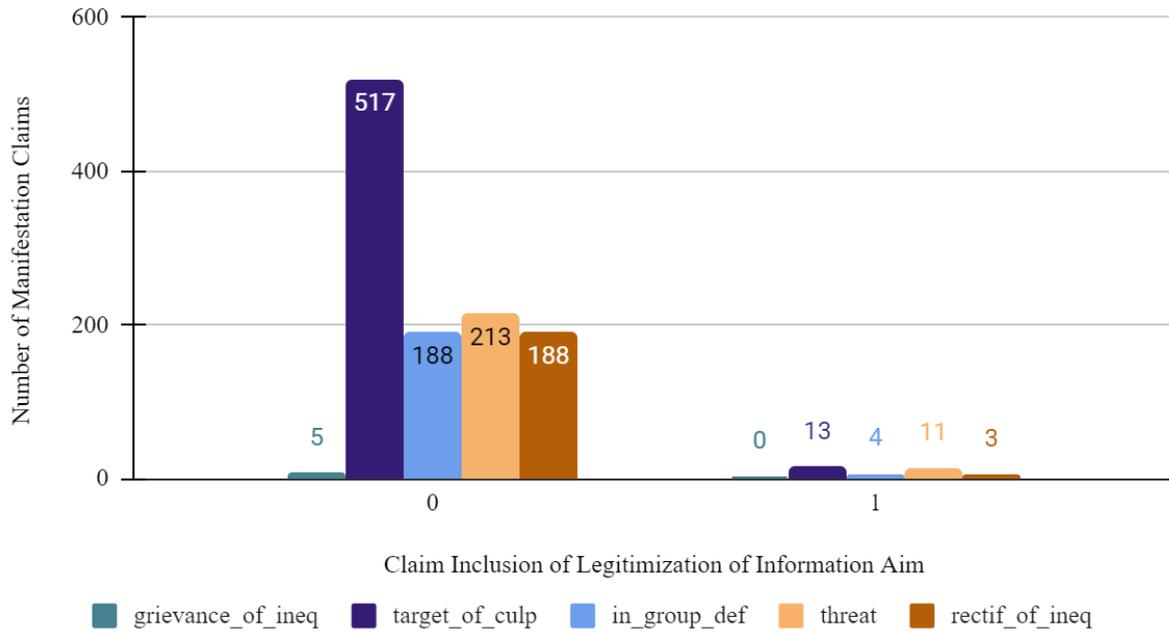
Figure 5. Manifestations of Populism Per Legitimization of Information Aim

Manifestations of Populism Per Legitimization of Governance Aim
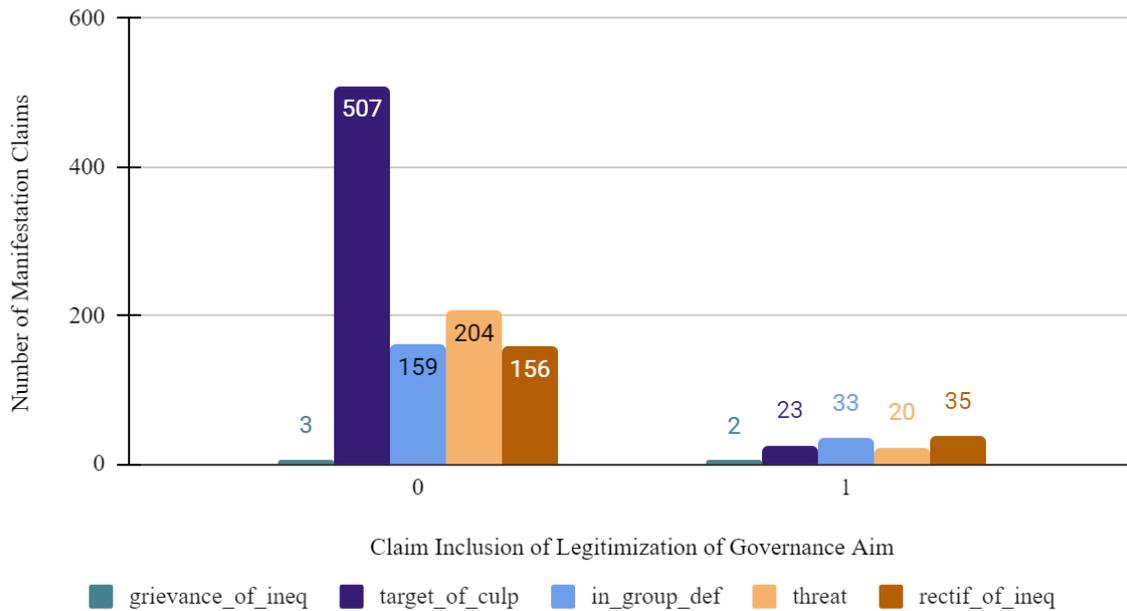
Figure 6. Manifestations of Populism Per Legitimization of Governance Aim

I finished my analysis of aims by conducting a temporal analysis, which can be seen in Figure 7. In studying the temporal trends of different aims of populism over time, we see a clear increase of claims containing the aim of legitimization of governance (legit_of_govern) following the establishment of the Syrian Salvation government (SSG) in November of 2023. Mobilization (mobilization) claims appear to peak in late December of 2017 and February of 2018, the latter corresponding with ongoing fights with the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF) and amid increases in Russian airstrikes (Syrian Archive). Legitimization of information (legit_of_info) similarly peaked in January and February of 2018 amid ongoing battles with the SLF, as HTS news sources worked to combat the competing media narratives of the SLF. This demonstrates that aims of claims varied over time according to the needs and activities of the militant group.
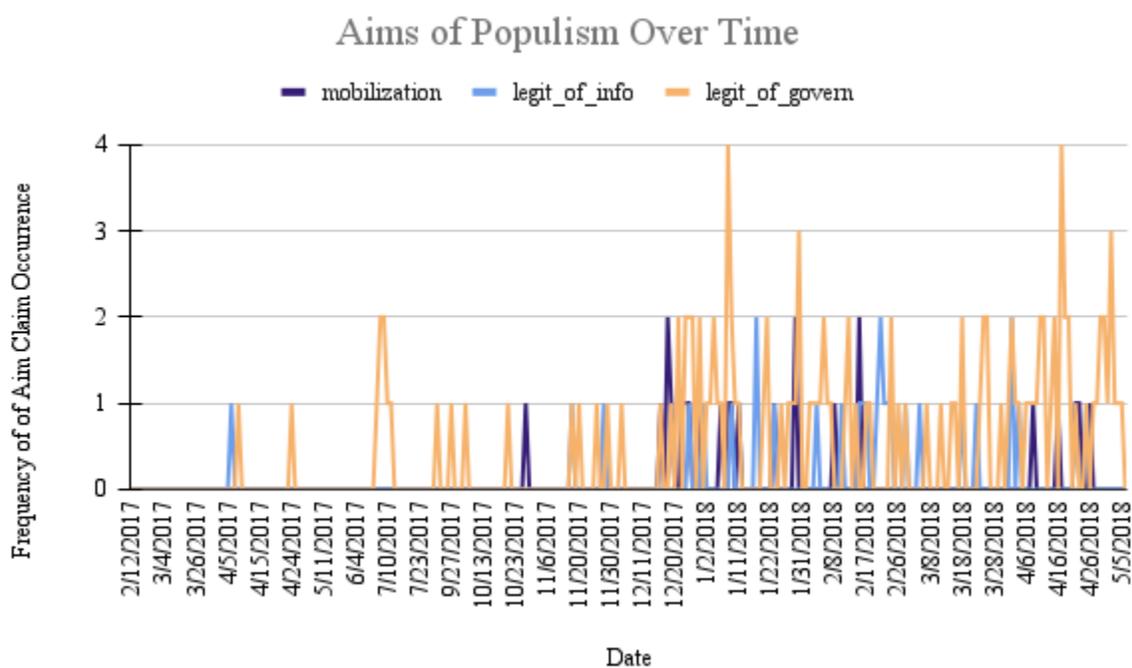
Figure 7. Aims of Populism Over Time

Impact of Populist Rhetoric on Capacity

I utilize a constructed timeline of HTS group and attack activity between February 2017 and April 2018 to qualitatively assess relationships between manifestations of populism and group capacity. I utilize attack numbers and group participation in goods provision as measures for group capacity. I construct frequency graphs for manifestations of populist rhetoric over time. I assess relationships between manifestations of populism and group capacity using these frequency graphs and the group activity timeline. Figure 8 includes a temporal depiction of all five of the manifestations studied, and individual temporal graphs for each manifestation can be found in Figures 9-13.
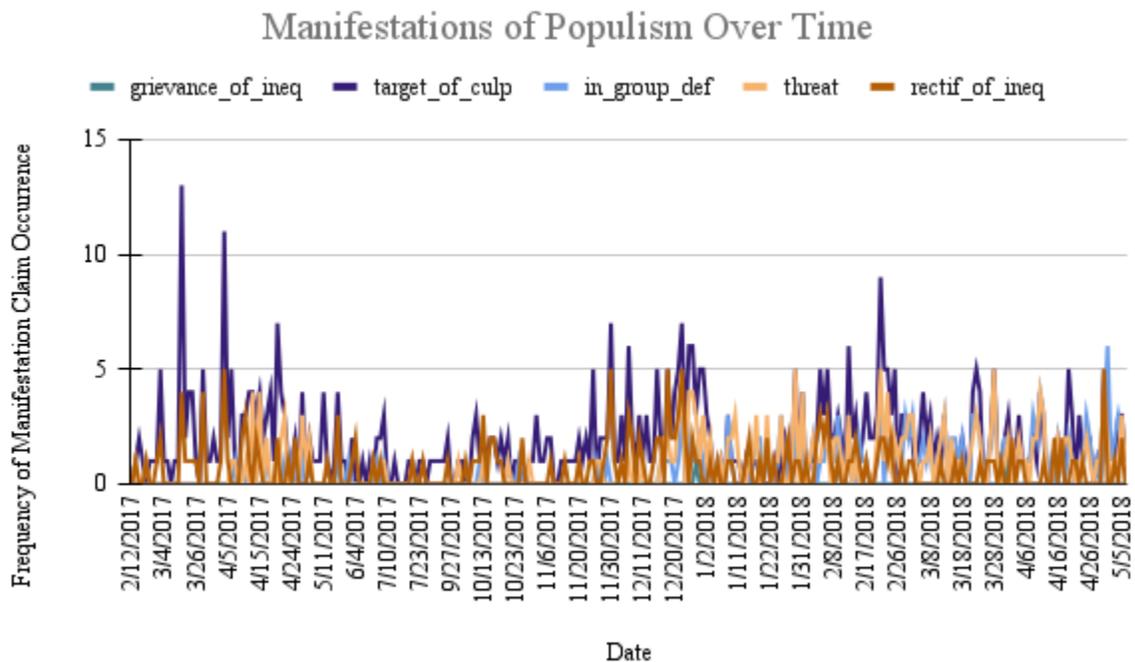
Figure 8. Manifestations of Populism Over Time

In evaluating grievance of inequality (grievance_of_ineq), I found that articulations of grievance of inequality occurred at a much lower frequency than I anticipated. These findings are portrayed in Figure 9 below. My theoretical framework based on populism in electoral contexts anticipated grievance of inequality would be a salient manifestation of populist rhetoric. However, grievance of inequality occurred at a very low frequency in HTS communications, only manifesting in five claims out of the 1,003 claims coded. As such, I conclude that grievance of inequality is less likely to occur in HTS militant group communications than within electoral contexts. Within HTS militant communications, threat features more saliently than grievances of inequality, and should be considered as a counterpart for grievance in the study of militant populist communication.

Due to the low frequency of grievance of inequality within HTS communications, it is difficult to evaluate the impact of its articulation on group capacity. As such, I can neither reject nor accept Hypothesis 1: that militant groups engaging in grievances in populist rhetoric are likely to see higher mobilization. These articulations occur briefly and far apart from each other, making it unlikely they had a significant impact on group capacity. For example, the first articulation of grievance in equality occurred on December 27, 2017, and expressed frustration over the eviction of residents of Aleppo as Shiite Muslims practice their rituals freely in the cities' mosques. December 2017 saw a string of kidnappings conducted by HTS, and January 2018 saw less HTS linked incidents than the previous month, but it is unlikely that the singular grievance of inequality communication had any impact on either of these trends.

Manifestations of Grievance of Inequality Over Time
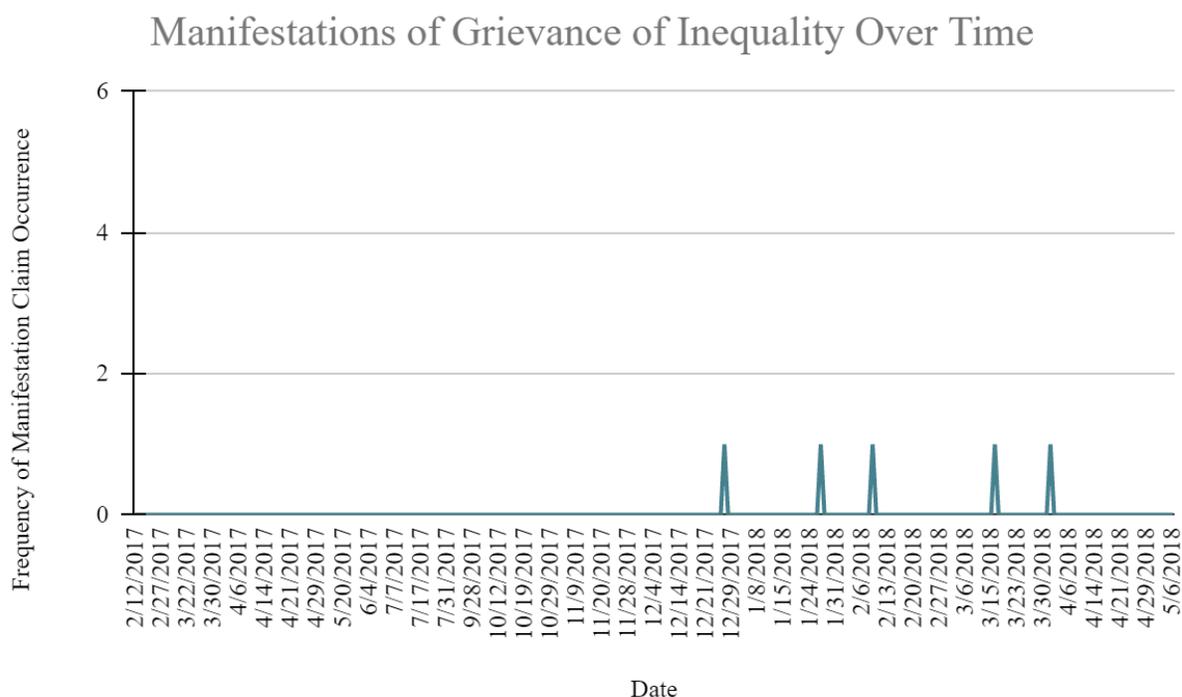
Figure 9. Manifestations of Grievance of Inequality Over Time

Target of culpability occurred at the highest rate of any of the manifestations of populism. Figure 10 below displays these findings. Target of culpability mainly consisted of negative framing of the regime and critique of other parties for identified wrongs. Significantly, even when HTS was fighting other militant groups such as Ahrar al-Sham or Harakat Nuri al-Din al-Zenki, there was very little attribution of negative framing to the groups relative to the negative framing of the al-Assad regime. HTS emphasized they were not inherently opposed to other militant groups even as they fought them.

Articulation of target of culpability was highest in mid-March of 2017, with steady increases in December 2017 and February 2018. While there were only 69 HTS-linked violent incidents in March 2017 (CSIS, 2018), on March 19th, HTS suicide bombers launched one of the

deadliest bombing attacks on Shiite Pilgrims at Bab al-Saghir cemetery in Damascus, killing 84

people (Mapping Militants, 2021). April 2017 saw a rise to 84 HTS-related incidents with

several suicide bombing attacks and attacks on Syrian Armed Forces (SAF). I do not find

sufficient evidence in my constructed timeline to accept or reject Hypothesis 3: that militant

groups engaging in articulations of target culpability will see higher mobilization. Rather, I see

target of culpability articulation occurring as a result of regime and foreign forces engaging in

attacks and airstrikes on civilian residential areas. The second highest frequency of target of

culpability articulation occurred in April 2017, when Russian airstrikes on Syria peaked that year

(Syrian Archive). With HTS mainly engaging in negative framing of the regime and foreign

forces, the increase of target of culpability articulation at a time of heightened Russian airstrikes

makes sense.
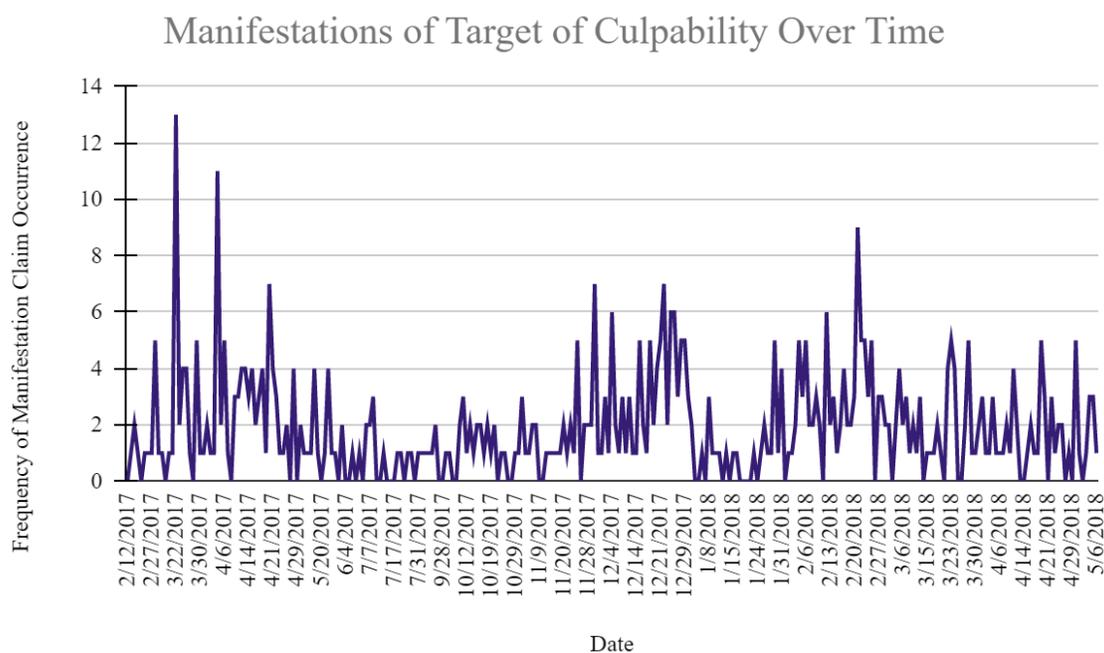
Figure 10. Manifestations of Target of Culpability Over Time

In-group definition follows similar trends as the threat manifestation of populist rhetoric, with increases in April 2017 and a steady rise following November 2017. Figure 11 below displays these findings. Significantly, in-group definition and threat have a positive correlation coefficient of 0.3699916267, the largest present between two manifestations of 0.3699916267. While threat claims do not always include an in-group definition, it is common for threat claims to specify an in-group against which potential harm or threat may occur. Thus, it can be expected that frequency trends for claims with articulations of threat and claims with articulations of in-group definition would be similar.

The increase of in-group definition frequency corresponds with the timeline of HTS governance establishment, with HTS and allied groups forming the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) on November 2nd, 2017 and significant increases in in-group definition occurring in December of 2017. In my analysis of frequency of each manifestation articulation for claims including the legitimization of governance aim (legit_of_govern), I found that in-group definition was the second most articulated manifestation in legitimization of governance claims after rectification of inequality. Similarly, in-group definition and legitimization of governance had a relatively large positive correlation coefficient of 0.07270895144. In our time-frequency analysis, we see frequency of in-group definition articulations rising following the establishment of the SSG, which can be understood in two ways. The first is that HTS's increased articulation of in-group definition following the establishment of the SSG to gain support for its governing body by describing its provisions and protections for specific populations. The second is that articulations of in-group definition organically increased as SSG governance communications entered the pool of HTS claims following the establishment of the governing body. Overall, I

conclude that articulation of in-group definition as a manifestation of populism is impacted by the legitimization of government aim.

Based on my constructed timeline, I do not have sufficient data to reject or accept Hypothesis 2: that militant groups engaging in in-group articulations of populist rhetoric will see higher mobilization. Rather, I have found evidence that in-group definitions may contribute to increased support of militant political structures in the relationship between increased articulations of in-group definition following the establishment of the SSG, and the success of the SSG in emerging as a governing body accepted by civilians.
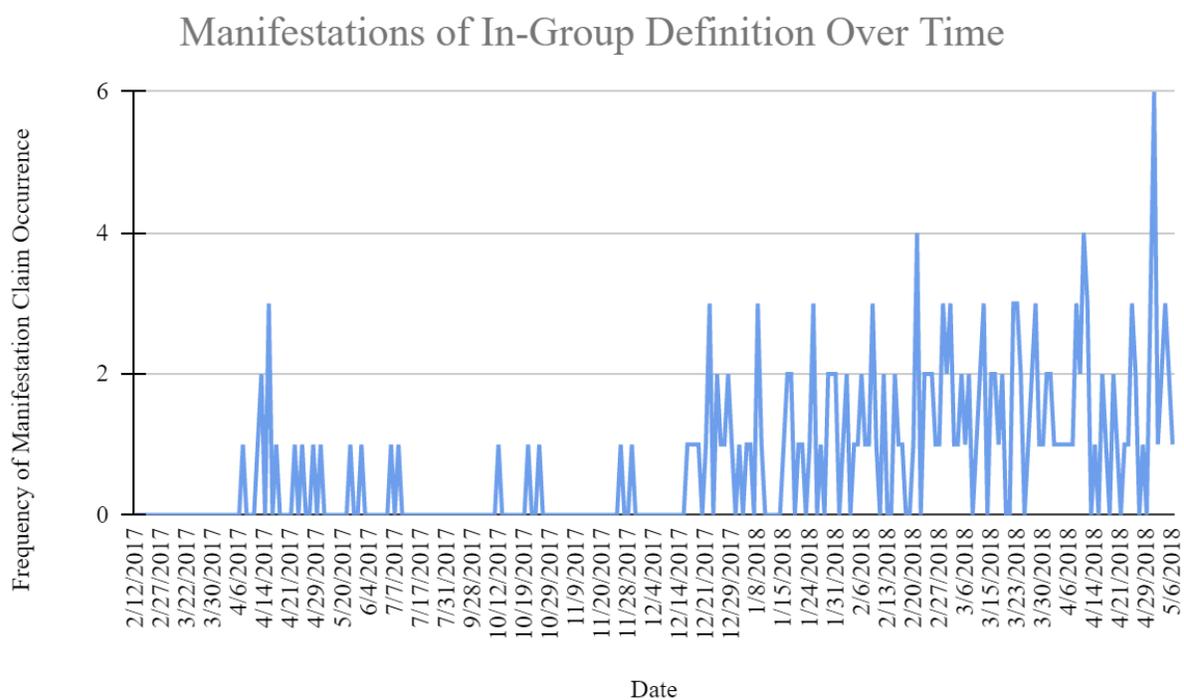
Figure 11. Manifestations of In-Group Definition Over Time

While conducting the initial survey of 500 communications, I identified two manifestations of militant populist communication that were not present in my theoretical framework based on populist theory in electoral contexts. These manifestations were threat (threat) and rectification of inequality (rectif_of_ineq). In my survey, I found that, while HTS engaged in very few articulations of grievance of inequality, they articulated many more perceived threats to civilians. These perceived threats included threats of airstrikes on residential centers and refugee camps, suicide attacks, crime. They also included threats to the existence of HTS or its operations in the form of conferences, negotiations, or agreements on the Syrian Civil war. Figure 12 below displays manifestations of threat over time.

HTS media articulated threats consistently throughout the February 2017 - April 2018 period, with a brief spike in April of 2017 and an increase after December of 2017. Overall, there was an increase in articulations of threat over time between February of 2017 and April of 2018. While April 2017 saw an increase to 84 HTS-linked violent incidents from the 69 attacks in March, this number dropped to 71 in May (CSIS, 2018). It is more likely there were increased articulations of threat in April due to the increased number of violent incidents than vise-versa. Regarding the increase of threat articulation following December 2017, December 2017 through April 2018 saw a slowly declining number of attacks from 193 in December to 101 in March. However, threat articulation remained consistent during this time, spiking in mid January 2018, February 2018, and late March 2018. As such, there is no strong correlation between threat articulation and group capability to conduct attacks, particularly based on the measure of group engagement in attack and violence. However, there is not sufficient data on civilian opinion on HTS and civilian support. Thus, while I can conclude that threat articulations do not necessarily increase group capacity to conduct attacks, I cannot draw conclusions about threat articulation's

success or failure in mobilizing the support of positive public opinion among civilians. I can neither accept nor reject Hypothesis 7: that militant groups engaging in articulations of threat within populist rhetoric will see increased mobilization.

In mid-January 2018, HTS rival groups Ahrar al-Sham and Harakat Nuri al-Din al-Zenki joined to form the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF) (Mapping Militants, 2021). This may have driven an increase in articulation of threat towards mobilization, or may have simply contributed to higher levels of threat present due to the ongoing clashes. One of the threats articulated most often was the threat of airstrikes in residential areas. Records of Russian airstrikes in 2017 and 2018 correspond with the spikes in threat articulation, with the most airstrikes occurring in April of 2017 and the beginning of January and February of 2018 (Syrian Archive).
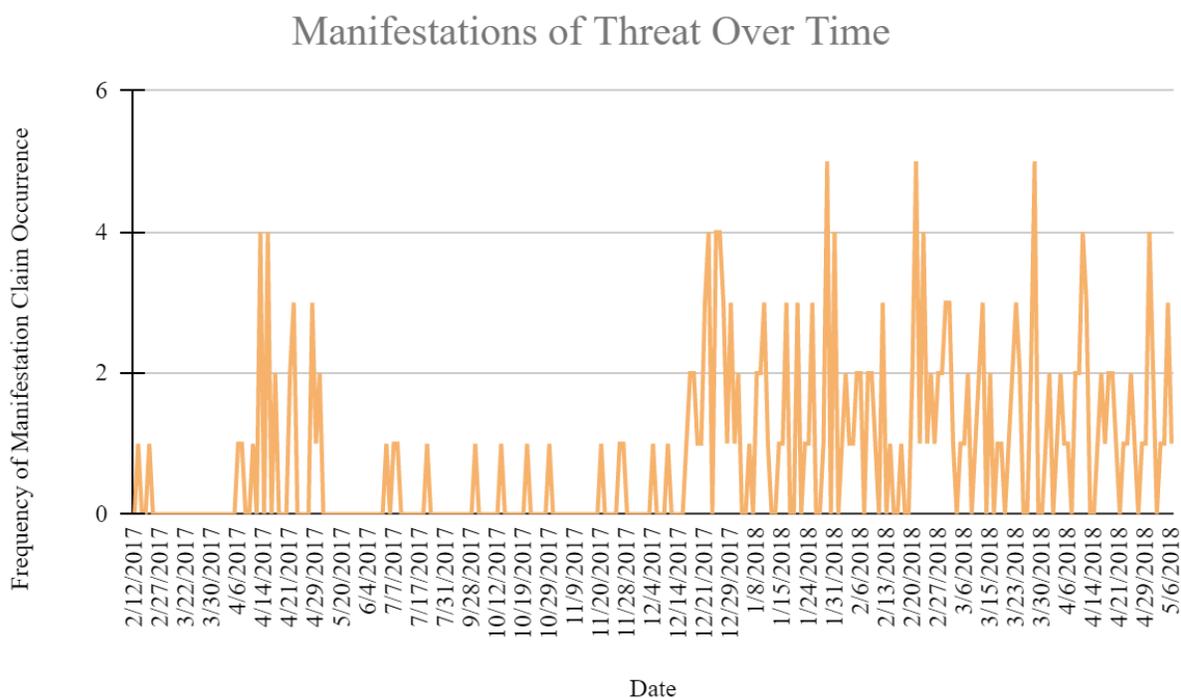

Figure 12. Manifestations of Threat Over Time

The last manifestation of populism I evaluated over time relative to HTS mobilization and activity was the manifestation of rectification of inequality (rectif_of_ineq). These findings are displayed in Figure 13 below. Rectification of inequality has a relatively high correlation coefficient of 0.08929395585 with legit_of_govern and the largest relative negative correlation coefficient with threat of -0.07162341504. HTS rectification of inequalities mainly took the form of military thwarting or combating of regime attacks, as well as rectifying criminal wrongs and economic imbalances.

Manifestation of rectification of inequality remains constant with three main spikes in late March of 2017, December 2017 through January 2018, and in late April of 2018. April 2017 saw an increase of HTS-linked violent incidents to 84 from 69 in March, before decreasing back to 71 incidents in May (CSIS, 2018). This small increase in violent incidents in April may be correlated with articulations of rectification of inequality in March. Additionally, While rectification of inequality articulations did surge in December of 2017 following the establishment of the SSG, articulation did not steadily increase, decreasing in February of 2018. Unlike in-group definition, the establishment of the SSG does not correlate with a steady rise in rectification of inequality. March of 2017 saw a string of HTS suicide bombing attacks against regime forces and Shiite Muslims while April 2018 saw increased fighting against Jabhat Tahrir al-Sham throughout the month before the signing of a peace agreement on April 24th (Counter Extremism Project). The cluster of rectification of inequality articulation around the month of March 2017 with its significant large-scale suicide attack on Shiite Muslims is significant, and may warrant further exploration of ties between articulations of ratification of inequality and

suicide attacks. At the same time, HTS carries out suicide bombings of regime forces routinely over 2017 and early 2018.

Drawing conclusions about the impact of rectification of inequality articulations on mobilization faces similar issues as drawing conclusions regarding articulations of threat. While there is data to draw conclusions about HTS participation in violence, there is insufficient data about civilian support of HTS to draw conclusions about the mobilization of popular support as a result of rectification of inequality articulation. As such, I can neither accept nor reject Hypothesis 8: that militant groups who engage in articulations of rectification of inequality within populist rhetoric will see increased mobilization.
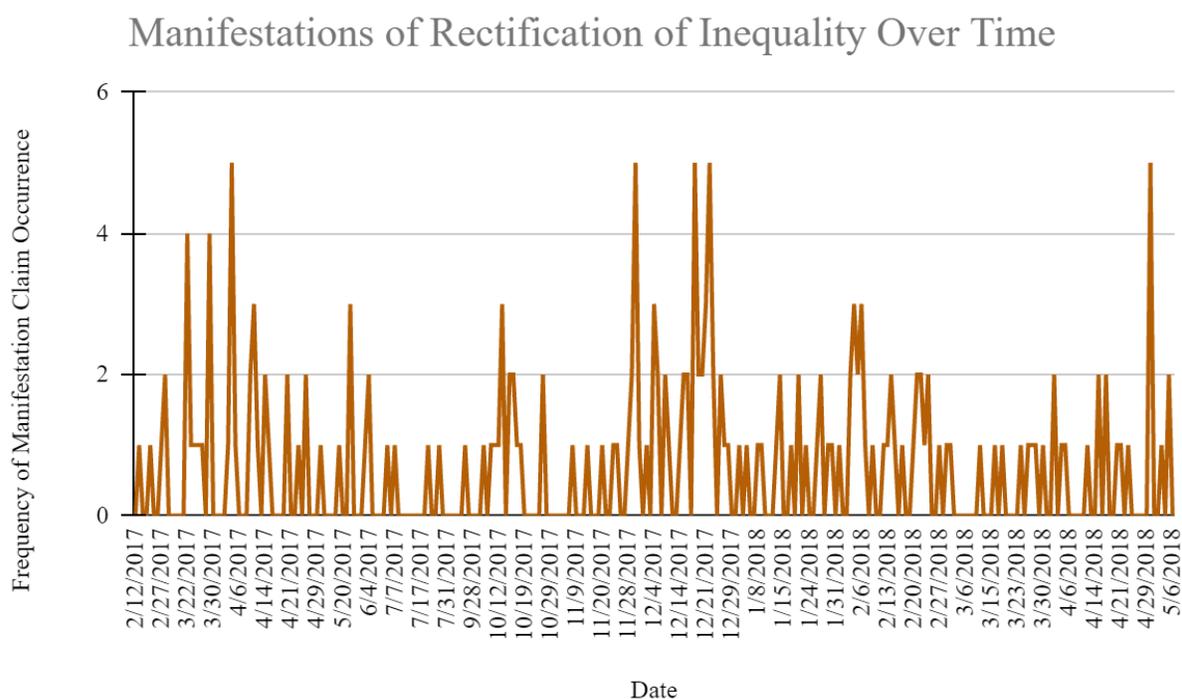

Figure 13. Manifestations of Rectification of Inequality Over Time

In my evaluation of manifestation of populism, aims of populist rhetoric, and relationships between populist rhetoric and mobilization, there were several significant findings. Firstly, theoretical understanding of populism formed from electoral contexts is not compatible with populism in civil conflict and is insufficient in understanding militant group articulation of populism. Secondly, I found that militant populist rhetoric was equally likely to occur as a product of events as it was to be used as a strategic driver of mobilization. While my theoretical framework anticipated that populist strategy would primarily be the latter, I conclude from my results that study of populist rhetoric should acknowledge its occurrence as a reactive rhetoric as well as proactive strategy. Finally, I concluded that the field of populism studies should include more analyses of the relationship between different aspects of rhetoric such as manifestations and aims, allowing for predictions of group rhetoric based on an understanding of group needs.

Discussion

In my thesis, I have developed and evaluated a theoretical framework for militant group articulation of populist language. I have explored the limits of the applicability of populist theory rooted in electoral contexts to militant group behavior, and identified areas in which civil-conflict specific theories of populist rhetoric are needed.

Within my survey and hand coding of militant group social media communications, I found several interesting and potentially significant rhetorical phenomena outside the bounds of my inquiry. One of these was militant group engagement in announcements of victory. HTS engaged in announcements of military victory and descriptions of fighter celebrations of victory. Announcements of group victory communicate group strength and capacity to protect civilians, gaining civilian trust that the group will protect them from any costs incurred by supporting the group. Conversely, acknowledging the victories of adversaries may decrease public support for a group as civilians lose faith in the group's military capacity to protect them. As such, HTS primarily engages in announcements of their own victories, and rarely mention losses or the victories of opponents.

Though this thesis presents one of the first attempts to understand populism in non-electoral contexts through the study of militant group engagement in populist rhetoric, it is important to address the limitations of this study. Within my qualitative exploration of the impact of populist rhetoric on group capacity, I do not include confounding variables such as location or social networks within my analysis. (Wiktorowicz, 2002). Within my study, I focused on civilian-focused communication, considering claims that were civilian-targeted as mobilizing

and not including militant targeted claims. Despite this, I saw HTS engaging in consistent mobilization and encouragement of their fighters through social media communications. My focus on civilian-facing communications did not allow me to capture and explore fighter-targeted rhetoric. Additionally, my qualitative study of the rhetoric of one militant group limits the generalizability and external validity of my findings, which should be evaluated quantitatively in future evaluation. Finally, my evaluation of populist rhetoric on militant capacity was limited by the lack of data on civilian support and group recruitment statistics.

While there is engagement in the study of the causes and benefits of victory announcements in militant group communications, it is an area of study requiring further exploration (Lakomy, 2020; Gade et al., 2022). Another area of militant group rhetoric that would benefit from further exploration is the inclusion of gruesome depictions of battle and corpses in militant communications. I found several references to images of corpses of their fallen enemies as well as images of their own fallen which necessitates exploration of the costs and benefits of such graphic messaging.

As the need for increased study of populist rhetoric in non-electoral contexts becomes increasingly apparent, I identify several future directions of this research. First, quantitative analysis of these theories must be conducted to strengthen a new, theoretical framework of militant group engagement in populist rhetoric in non-electoral contexts. This framework should be evaluated in a study examining the rhetoric and capacity of multiple groups. Such studies will strengthen conceptualization of militant populism and allow for the formation of more robust definitions of militant populism. A framework of militant populist engagement may inform understandings of threat presentation and the degree to which political parties are considered to have robust and legitimate governance in electoral populism. Greater understanding of militant

populism may additionally shed light on populist rhetoric of authoritarian governments who, similar to militant groups, acquire non-electoral benefits from mobilization of support.

Where theories of populism have concluded that conservative or liberal political affiliations are unlikely to affect a group's engagement in populist language, the relationship between different militant group characteristics and engagement in populist rhetoric has yet to be evaluated. Additional study is necessary to determine the relationship between populist rhetoric and characteristics of militant groups such as authoritarian or democratic nature, group goals, the strength and nature of in-group identity. As contemporary civil conflicts progress, we are able to evaluate the impact of populist rhetoric on outcomes, drawing conclusions on whether populist language in a conflict strengthens or weakens postwar political bodies and processes. Studying the effectiveness of a party's populist rhetoric before and after a peacemaking process would allow for a comparison of populist rhetoric in between civil conflict and in electoral or political context. Finally, Islamist populism is a growing area of study in the literature, and should be studied in non-electoral conflicts as well. As we see increasing numbers of civil conflicts coinciding with a rise in populist language globally, the study of populist rhetoric in civil conflict and non-electoral contexts is increasingly important.

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Appendices

Appendix A

HTS Social Media Claim Coding Ontology

claim_num (numeric)

This is a unique identifier for the claim. Each claim in the dataset has a unique claim_number.

osc_claim_id (numeric)

This is a unique identification number assigned to each claim by the US Government.

day (numeric)

       This is the day on which the claim was posted. Days should be entered in a simple numeric format. If the claim was posted on the 27th of September, enter "*27*" into the cell. The day can usually be found in the first line of the claim.

Example:

> At 1807 GMT on **27** September, YouTube user "Wikalat Iba" uploaded a 2-minute 5-second video[6]

-    When there is no actual date included in the claim, input the day of the last claim that featured a date.

month (numeric)

       This is the month in which the claim was posted. Months should be entered in a simple numeric format with January being 1 and December being 12. If the claim was posted on the 27th of September, enter "*9*" into the cell. The month can usually be found in the first line of the claim.

Example:

> At 1807 GMT on 27 **September**, YouTube user "Wikalat Iba" uploaded a 2-minute 5-second video[7]

-    When there is no actual date included in the claim, input the month of the last claim that featured a date.

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[6] Claim ID: 1
[7] Claim ID: 1

year (numeric)

This is the year in which the claim was posted. Years should be entered in a simple numeric format. If the claim was posted in 2016, enter "*2016*" into the cell. The year cannot be found in the first line of the claim, and instead is included in the Claim ID assigned to the claim during processing.

Exception:

- When claims are processed on January 1st for December claims, the Claim ID will include a year that is not representative of the year the claims were published in. In this case, input the year prior to the year included in the Claim ID

group_name (text)

This is the name of the group that posted the claim.

group_id (ID)

This is the ID of the group that posted the claim.

claim_full_text (text)

This is the entire text of the claim.

comm_type (categorical)

This is the type of claim. Claims can be either attack or communication claims. Attack claims are any claims that mention fighting, attacks, or combat between any two militant groups. Communication claims are all other claims. Even if a claim is largely nonviolent in nature, inclusion of a video or photo depicting violence makes it an attack claim

- Attack
    - Attack claims are any claims of combat between HTS and any other group. This includes HTS assassinations, combat between individuals, and martyrdom seeking attacks. Attack claims include an instance or action of attack or violence, or seizure of weapons on the part of HTS. Claims that discuss forces or arms but do not describe instances of attack or violence are considered communication claims.
    - Claims that only discuss violence against civilians or HTS are **not** attack claims. Claims only discussing violence against civilians or HTS do not include instances of violent retaliation by HTS within the claim. In order to be considered an attack claim, HTS must be engaged in a violent activity or preparation for a violent activity involving arms or transportation
    - Claims that describe forces monitoring other parties are **not** attack claims

- - Claims describing preparation for attacks that are violent or involve arms or transportation are coded as attack claims. Claims describing preparation for attacks that are personal or religious are coded as communication claims
  - Claims describing arrests are not considered attack claims
  - Claims describing training are not considered attack claims
  - Claims describing corpses or dead bodies with no description of violence are not considered attack claims
  - Building fortifications is **not** an attack claim
  - Disabling bombs is **not** an attack claim

- - Communication
  - - Communication claims are all claims that are not attack claims. Communication claims may include mention of meetings or negotiations, or may be public messaging to civilians.

Elements of Populism
- Enter a 1 in the cell if the claim demonstrates the following elements of populism. A single claim can demonstrate more than one element.

grievance_of_ineq (0/1)

Enter 1 in this cell if the claim features the grievance of inequality element of populist rhetoric. To fulfill this requirement, the claim must specifically identify an inequality that a group is facing. This could be an inequality in resource access, economic status, or political effectiveness, in which there is mention of relative disadvantages.

This is an example of an articulation of a relative disadvantage:
- *"greedy" merchants have increased the prices of "fuel and sugar" across the "liberated north."[8]*

Civilians are disadvantaged in their access to fuel and sugar relative to merchants.

The following is an example of a claim that features a disadvantage that is NOT a relative disadvantage, as it only discusses one side of an inequality:

> *"The Difficulty of Securing Heating Material in Winter." It details difficulties people in the Latakia countryside face getting logs for heating logs from nearby forests"[9]*

 Instead, this would be coded as a threat.

target_of_culp (0/1)

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[8] Claim ID: 56
[9] Claim ID: 481

Enter 1 in this cell if the claim features the target of culpability element of populist rhetoric. To fulfill this requirement, the claim must specifically identify a group that is negatively framed. This negative frame can feature proximity of the identification to an articulation of a grievance or threat. The negative frame can also look like the attachment of a negative adjective to the group identification. Once the claim is coded with a 1 for ***target_of_culp***, write the negative frame in the notes column. If it is stated that HTS "denounces" or "condemns" a group, they are considered a ***target_of_culp.***

- Proximity example:

> *"people in 'liberated' regions prefer to work around their needs 'with dignity' to receiving normal services from the **regime that 'bombs them**.'"[10]*

- Negative adjective example:

> *"Report **Criminal Regime** Targets Pharmaceutical Factories in Western Aleppo Countryside"[11]*

Vocab that inherently qualifies as negative framing:
- *Nusayri* (pejorative word for Alawite) - refers to regime forces
- *Kharijite* (name of early breakaway Islamic sect, applied to perceived heretics)
- *Al Baghdadi's Gangs,mobs* - Usually refers to ISIS
- *al-Asad gangs* - refers to regime forces

In claims in which HTS counters or repels attacks, the attacker is **not** automatically considered ***target_of_culp*** attacker, unless there is a negative frame attached to the attacker. However, if the attacking group also committed another wrong, such as kidnapping, massacre, assassination, harm against civilians, or violation of an agreement that is listed alongside their attack, they would be a ***target_of_culp.***
- "HTS repels military jets" would **not** be considered ***target_of_culp***

in-group-def (0/1)

Enter 1 in this cell if the claim features the in-group definition element of populist rhetoric. To qualify as featuring in-group definition, a claim must clearly identify an in-group. In-group definitions can be as vague as *"people in 'liberated regions"[12]*, *"children"[13]* or *"civilians"[14]*.

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[10] Claim ID: 309
[11] Claim ID: 320
[12] Claim ID: 309
[13] Claim ID: 326
[14] Claim ID: 388

Specific in-group definitions can be:
- Object/idea with attached identifier: *"the purity of **Sunni jihad**"*[15]
- Group: *"his group "wants the best for its ummah **(community of Muslims worldwide)**"*[16]

A claim would not qualify as an in-group definition if it does not include a minimum requirement of specificity. For example, *"people",* or *"martyrs"* alone does not meet the minimum requirement of specificity. However, a qualifier to the word people or the designation of a subset of people can meet the minimum requirement of specificity.
- Example of added qualifier: *"liberated people"*, *"civilian martyrs"*
- Example of designation of subset: *"children"* (age based), *"women"* (gender-based) or *"poor"* (economically based)

Militant groups or forces are not considered in-group definitions. The use of the word "Forces" or description of forces would **not** constitute an in-group definition
Vocab that would not be considered in-group definitions:
- Forces
- Troops
- Soldiers
- Mujahideen

Individuals are not considered in-group definitions. Locations (town, village) are not considered in-group definitions. Even when there are instances of targeting of locations that are implied to have civilians such as towns and villages, unless there is specific mention of civilians, there is no **in_group** definition.

threat (0/1)

Enter 1 in this cell if the claim features a threat element of populist rhetoric. To qualify as featuring a threat, a claim must include an impending danger (military, economic, political or religious), a lack of access, or a past harm. This threat can be physical, such as military attack/advance or non-physical, such as attack on HTS's reputation.

- Military threat example: *"the American and Gulf airplanes carry out dozens of slaughter [operations against Syrians""*[17]
- Religious/Reputation threat example: *"**sharia-related corruption** as it will gradually lead to emulating them and **tarnish the reputation of jihad and the mujahideen**."*[18]

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[15] Claim ID: 70
[16] Claim ID: 270
[17] Claim ID: 396
[18] Claim ID: 384

- Lack of access example: *"The Difficulty of Securing Heating Material in Winter." It details **difficulties people in the Latakia countryside face getting logs for heating** logs from nearby forests"*[19]
- An attack on HTS's reputation can include accusations or negative portrayal of the group by other sources.

Even when people are not described as the target of shelling or artillery, description of airstrikes or shelling conducted by parties other than HTS should be coded as a threat. Shelling or artillery should be coded as threat when targeting places as well, such as towns, positions, villages.

Description of military action or activity alone would not be a threat. In order to be coded as a threat, claims must describe activity that directly threatens the lives, wellbeing, or capacity of HTS as an entity or civilians.
- Assassinations would not be considered a threat unless the assassination is explicitly targeting civilians

rectif_of_ineq (0/1)

Enter 1 if this cell if the claim features a rectification of inequality. To qualify as a rectification of inequality, the claim must include an instance of the militant group or its associated civil administration claiming to address an inequality or threat. The group or civil administration does not have to completely rectify the issue, rather they must acknowledge a threat or identify a target of culpability and describe action they are taking against it.

Economic Example:

> *"At 1156 GMT on 10 October, YouTube user "Wikalat Iba'" uploaded a 3-minute 31-second video bearing the logo of the Iba' News Agency titled "Controlling the Prices of Basic Goods in the Liberated North." It charges that "greedy" merchants have increased the prices of "fuel and sugar" across the "liberated north." **In interviews, two officials in the group's "economic bureau" say the group has established "distribution centers" for natural gas tanks and sugar, and is monitoring merchants**"*[20]

- The claim features an economic inequality. The bolded portion features the civil administration's efforts to rectify the inequality
- "Liberated North" is **not** part of the *rectif_of_ineq* because it refers to a place, not that the north has just been liberated.

Military Example:

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[19] Claim ID: 481
[20] Claim ID: 55

> *"that the Corps views itself as an "integral part of the people's revolution…to protect our people and liberate our land"*[21]

- The use of the words "protect" and "liberate" here imply that the people are under attack and the land must be liberated. That is why I would code this as a rectification of an inequality.
- Descriptions of attacks or clashes would not be coded as ***rectif_of_ineq*** on their own. Rather, military rectifications or combatting of threats would be considered ***rectif_of_ineq***, utilizing terms such as "combatted attacks", "thwarted advances", "pushed forces back", "liberated". "Avenged" deaths can also be considered an articulated rectification of an inequality that would be coded as yes/1 for ***rectif_of_ineq***.

- Arrests are **not** inherently considered ***rectif_of_ineq*** unless it is articulated that the arrest was conducted to prevent harm or threat, or unless additional action was taken to prevent the harm the arrest was conducted to prevent.

Note: A ***rectif_of_ineq*** claim can include ***grievance_of_ineq*** and/or a ***threat*** coded as including a rectification of an inequality. Despite including the word "***ineq***", a ***rectif_of_ineq*** does not strictly need to only be a rectification of ***grievance_of_ineq.***

<u>Aims of Claims</u> (do I code for all of these aims even for claims that have no populist elements?)
- Enter a 1 in the cell if the claim demonstrates the following aims. A single claim can demonstrate more than one aim.

mobilization (0/1)
Enter 1 in this cell if the claim includes an aim of mobilization. Claims with an aim of mobilization attempt to garner support for the group posting it. This support can be material or immaterial. Material mobilization can look like the mobilization of resources or recruitment. Immaterial support can be mobilization of political or religious support for the organization. Claims should only be coded as a 1 for mobilization if the mobilization targets civilians or non-militant groups to gain support for a militant group. Claims are **not** mobilization if they involve civilians or groups attempting to mobilize HTS or other militant groups.

Example of material support claim:

> *At 1357 GMT on 30 May, Facebook user "Sawt al-Hasakah" posted an embedded image of an untitled statement bearing the Tahrir al-Sham Corps logo, in which the group decries "how all nations have gathered against us from across the globe" and "wreaked havoc," which*

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[21] Claim ID: 270

> *"mandated a response." **"Therefore,"** the statement adds, **"the sons of Tahrir al-Sham Corps in Al Hasakah are calling to arms our brothers in that governorate as well as those living abroad. We urge them to step forward and defend the banner of Islam."** The statement includes a contact phone number for those interested.[22]*

- This is a clear recruitment claim. Thus, it would receive 1 for including an aim of mobilization

Example of immaterial support claim:

> *At 1114 GMT on 27 October, Twitter user "Hazar Hashimi" (@tf_hn9d5g7j31yy, user ID 884041797449773056) tweeted a link to a Justpaste.it document attributed to Abu-al-Fath al-Farghali, the sharia official of the Corps' military wing, titled "A Warner Calls Before Regrets Become Warthlaca" In the danimant al Carahali andraceae "all tha muahidaan in Syria." He stresses: **"Jihad is now an obligation to counter the apostate, infidel, and Kharijite aggressors." He warns: "Anyone who can participate in thwarting the enemy, has weapons or money that can be offered, and does not do so" is a "major sinner" according to sharia**. He adds: "There should be no obedience to any amir or sharia official, no matter who he is, that deters from this mandated jihad." He argues that any different concepts promoted by "amirs or evil sharia officials can be refuted through the Koran and sunna" and thus cautions of the punishment of abandoning jihad" and urges action.[23]*

- This claim attempts to gain immaterial support for the jihad of the group through religious appeals.

Claims that describe mobilization activities but that do not call for mobilization explicitly themselves should still be coded as a 1 for mobilization.

- This includes claims detailing recruitment activities

legit_of_info (0/1)

Enter 1 in this cell if the claim includes the aim of legitimization of information. This can include the legitimation of group information sources, or the identification and critique of information sources the group deems inaccurate or threatening. It can also include the description of processes necessary to release legitimate information or include prohibitions on the release of information under the name of the group without sufficient permission.

Example:

> *At 2140 GMT on 19 September, Twitter user "Abu-Rayan Ma'sadah" (@alm2sda; user ID 2250316038) tweeted an embedded screenshot of a Telegram post by 'Imad al-Din Mujahid,*

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[22] Claim ID: 160
[23] Claim ID: 47

> *the group's director of media relations, that reads: "Note: There are dozens of accounts on social media that claim to be affiliated to and supportive of the Tahrir al-Sham Corps. **I would like to alert you that it is the official accounts of the [Tahrir al-Sham] Corps that represent the creed, methodology, and behavior of the Corps**. **Any other account that does not abide by the Corps policies belongs to unknown people and infiltrators** who aim to sow strife and schism among Sunnis in Syria."[24]*

- This claim both identifies accounts associated with the group and criticizes information sources threatening the information security of the group. (A claim only needs to include one of these elements to receive a 1 for legit_of_info)

Claims including rectification or illumination of deception is **not** inherently legit_of_info. The claims must include rectification of deception regarding HTS or HTS-affiliated information sources. Rectification or illumination of deception of other groups or other group news sources is **not** legit_of_info.

legit_of_govern (0/1)

Enter 1 in this cell if the claim includes the aim of legitimization of governance. This can take the form of a mention of a civil administration associated with the militant group, or the description of the operations of the civil administration associated with the militant group. Legitimization of governance includes rhetoric positively depicting the government as well as descriptions of provision of services, security maintenance, or efforts of negotiation by the group-affiliated civil administration. If there is a description of provision of services with no mention of the provisioning party, code the claim as 1 (yes) for ***legit_of_govern***.
- Governance means provision of services, security maintenance, efforts of negotiation, legislative or governmental work.

Positive depiction of the HTS affiliated government is also captured as *legit_of_govern*. This can be seen where the HTS affiliated government is positively described or framed using positive adjectives. Claims describing governance of or legitimating larger bodies that HTS participates in, for example the "Salvation Government", qualifies as ***legit_of_govern.***

Claims describing actions taken by the HTS security office or arrests conducted by the office are considered ***legit_of_govern.***
- "Security operations" are not considered ***legit_of_govern***. Only mentions of security officers or offices are considered ***legit_of_govern.*** This is because sometimes regular forces engage in security operations that have nothing to do with governance
- If there is no mention of security office or officials, and there is violence rather than an arrest, the claim would not be considered ***legit_of_govern***

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[24] Claim ID: 12

Example of legitimization of group governance:

> *At 1115 GMT on 20 July, Twitter user "Hazar Hashimi" (@Hn9dTf; user ID 884041797449773056) tweeted: "The Tahrir al-Sham Corps's response to the initiative to end infighting," along with an embedded image of a statement bearing the Tahrir al-Sham Corps logo titled "A Brief Commentary on the Kind Initiative." It expresses appreciation for an initiative by three key jihadist clerics… but says it is not original, and will not achieve the "desired standards."* **It adds that the Tahrir al-Sham Corps awaits "a true initiative that will end division and schism and present a realistic project of self-governance and an administration that can make war and peace decisions.***" [25]

Example of legitimization of group-affiliated civil administration:

> *On 17 July, YouTube user "Wikalat Iba' al-Ikhbariyah" posted a 1-minute 18-second video produced by the Iba' News Agency titled* **"The Civil Directorate of Services Responds to the Local Council's Request To Repair the Electricity Network in Al Mansurah Town West of Aleppo."** *The video features two officials saying regime airstrikes damaged electricity towers in Al Mansurah and commending the Tahrir al-Sham Corps "directorate of civilian services" for promptly responding to their call for help by sending workers to "repair the damaged transformers."*[26]

Claims describing action taken by "volunteers" or "activists" would **not** be coded as *legit_of_govern* **unless** it was clearly specified that the volunteers or activists were HTS-affiliated, or that they were operating in an HTS-affiliated institution.

Claims of religious activities or events affiliated with the group's religious offices are **not** considered *legit_of_govern.*

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[25] Claim ID: 363
[26] Claim ID: 350

Appendix B

HTS Group Activity Timeline 2017- 2018

Context

The DOD data that I have spans 2017-2018. This period captures several significant moments such as the formation of HTS, and the 2017 clashes between HTS and the Ahrar al-Sham movement.[27]

History - HTS was formed in 2017 through the merging of Jabhat al-Nusra (otherwise known as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham) with other militant groups. Al Nusra was established in Syria in 2011 when Al Qaeda of Iraq, rebranded as Islamic State of Iraq, sent operatives to Syria to organize regional jihadist cells at the outbreak of the civil war. In 2016, al-Nusra cut ties with Al Qaeda and renamed itself Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. In January of 2017, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham merged with competing Sunni jihad groups to establish Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).[28] HTS has been designated as a terrorist organization by the USA, UN, EU, and Turkey due to its ties with Al Qaeda. For much of its existence, HTS has controlled the most populous region of Syria after the Syrian Government.[29]

Political Aims

- HTS aims for unity among Syrian Jihadist groups while maintaining a policy of no negotiation with the Assad regime.[30]

Religious Makeup

- HTS is a Sunni Muslim jihadi group.[31] The group believes in government-enforced Sharia Law, but the militant group's leader expressed in 2021 that such enforcement should be "not according to the standards of ISIS or even Saudi Arabia". While HTS has enforced gender segregation in schools, they have not imposed their own curriculum or limited women from education.[32]

Group Acronyms

- Ha'yat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)
- Syrian Armed Forces (SAF)
- Syrian Liberation Front/ Jabhat Tahrir Suriya (SLF/JTS)
- Free Syrian Army (FSA)

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[27] Asian Tribune - "Syrian rebels and insurgents battle in split over peace push"
[28] Mapping Militants - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
[29] Combating Terrorism Center - Twenty Years After 9/11: The Fight for Supremacy in Northwest Syria and the Implications for Global Jihad
[30] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[31] Mapping Militants - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
[32] Wilson Center - HTS: Evolution of a Jihadi Group

2017

January 2017
- Increased US airstrikes against Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in an effort to dissuade other groups from merging with al-Sham.[33]
- Jabhat Fatah al-Sham attacks Free Syrian Army (FSA- secular anti-Assad fighters) positions west of Aleppo.
- Jabhat Fatah al-Sham clashes with Ahrar al-Sham in Idlib and Aleppo governorates.[34]
- 23rd - Jabhat Fatah al-Sham surround US-backed Jaish al-Mujahideen offices in Idlib.[35]
- 28th - Jabhat Fatah al-Sham rebrand, joining with Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Liwa al-Haq, Jaysh al-Sunna, and Jabhat Ansar al-Din to establish HTS.[36]
    - This leads many jihadists to leave the group, whose merger/establishment was not sanctioned by Al Qaeda.[37]

February 2017
- 2nd - HTS attack Syrian Armed Forces (SAF soldiers in Ghuta neighborhood, Damascus.[38]
- 9th - HTS leader Sheikh Hashim al-Sheikh releases first public statement, calling for unity in the Syrian insurgency and recounting HTS's successes.[39][40]
- 12th - HTS carry out attacks 3 attacks in Daraa City, killing 23 in an attack that featured suicide bombers in explosive vehicles.[41]
- HTS kidnap journalist Mohamed Abdulqader Sbeh in Idlib, released him on March 9th.[42]
- 25th
    - HTS fighters carry out a suicide attack on the Military Intelligence Directorate[43]in Homs, killing Assad government officials.[44]
    - HTS fighters carry out suicide attack in Ghouta neighborhood on the Government of Syria State Security headquarters.[45]
- 26th
    - HTS attacks SAF in Rif Dimashq.[46]

[33] Mapping Militants - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
[34] Wilson Center - HTS: Evolution of a Jihadi Group
[35] Asian Tribune- "Syrian rebels and insurgents battle in split over peace push"
[36] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[37] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[38] BAAD
[39] Mapping Militants - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
[40] Long War Journal - Hay'at Tahrir al Sham leader calls for 'unity' in Syrian insurgency
[41] BAAD
[42] BAAD
[43] BAAD
[44] Mapping Militants - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
[45] BAAD
[46] BAAD

- HTS claims responsibility for suicide bombing attack at the Homs City Military Security Headquarters[47]

March 2017
- 69 HTS-linked violent incidents this month.[48]
- 11th - Two HTS bombers attack Shiite pilgrims visiting the Bab al-Saghir cemetery in Damascus, killing at least 84 people.[49] [50]
- 19th
    - HTS Suicide bomber in explosive vehicle carries out attack in Jobar neighborhood, Damascus.[51]
    - HTS Fighters armed with projectiles and firearms attack in Jobar neighborhood, Damascus.[52]
- 21st - HTS carries out suicide bombing attack targeting Syrian Army checkpoint on road leading to Surrah, Hamah.[53] Following the attack, fighters attacked the area.[54]
- 23rd - HTS attacked SAF targets in Hamah.[55]
- 24th - HTS set up a checkpoint between Bab al-Hawa and Sarmada in Idlib, seizing two Ihsan Relief and Development Organization trucks transporting flour.[56]

April 2017
- 84 HTS-linked violent incidents this month.[57]
- 6th - HTS fighters with firearms attacked Mardis town in Hamah, killing at least 21 soldiers.[58]
- 15th
    - An HTS suicide bomber detonated a vehicle packed with explosives near an evacuation bus convoy in Rashidin neighborhood, Aleppo, killing at least 126 people.[59]
    - An HTS vehicle detonated at an SAF base near Salma, killing at least 10 soldiers.[60]
- Russian airstrikes on Syria increase/peak for 2017 [61]

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[47] Counter Extremism Project
[48] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[49] Public Safety Canada - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham
[50] BAAD
[51] BAAD
[52] BAAD
[53] BAAD
[54] BAAD
[55] BAAD
[56] BAAD
[57] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[58] BAAD
[59] BAAD
[60] BAAD
[61] Syrian Archive - Russian Airstrikes Database

- HTS fights Jaish al-Islam in Ghouta, Damascus[62]

May 2017
- 71 HTS-linked violent incidents this month.[63]
- HTS forms the General Monetary Agency for Cash Management and Consumer Protection in order to regulate "exchange operations and prevent… monopoly and manipulation of currency rates in Idlib Governorate."[64]

June 2017
- 61 HTS-linked violent incidents this month.[65]
- 8th - HTS attacks FSA and Faylaq al Sham in Maarat al-Numan, killing a FSA colonel.[66]
- 13th - HTS kidnaps two FSA commanders in Idlib,[67]
- 19th - HTS assassinates the commander of First Brigade of the Golan Regiment[68]
- 23rd - HTS kills Hezbollah fighters in raids along the border between Lebanon and Syria,[69]
- HTS signed a peace agreement with the Free Idlib Army, which oversaw the FSA in Idlib.[70]
- HTS takes over the Bab al-Hawa crossing between Syria and Turkey.[71]

July 2017
- 182 HTS-linked violent incidents this month.[72]
- 14th - HTS and Ahrar al-Sham clash in Idlib[73]
- 19th
    - HTS fighters opened fire on protesters in Idlib.[74]
    - HTS suicide bombing attack with explosive vehicle at Ahrar al-Sham headquarters in Armanaz, Idlib.[75]
    - HTS fighters attack Ahrar al-Sham members in Hazarin, Idlib.[76]
- HTS drives Ahrar al-Sham from Idlib province.[77]

[62] Counter Extremism Project
[63] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[64] Middle East Institute - The Economics of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
[65] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[66] Counter Extremism Project
[67] Counter Extremism Project
[68] Counter Extremism Project
[69] Counter Extremism Project
[70] Mapping Militants - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
[71] Middle East Institute - The Economics of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
[72] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[73] Counter Extremism Project
[74] BAAD
[75] BAAD
[76] BAAD
[77] Mapping Militants - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

- Factors that interviewees attributed this victory to included the organizational capacity and the religious discourse of HTS.[78]
- HTS fights Jaish al-Islam in Ghouta, Damascus.[79]

August 2017
- 76 HTS-linked violent incidents this month.[80]
- 15th - *HTS fire rockets that landed in Akramiyeh neighborhood, Aleppo.[81]
- 20th - *HTS fire mortar at Damascus International Fair in Jarmana, Damascus.[82]
- 28th -
    - *HTS fighter attacks SAF and National Defense soldiers in Tal al-Dara, Hamah.[83]
    - *HTS accused of assassinating commander of the Nour al-Din al-Zenki militant group[84]

September 2017
- 81 HTS-linked violent incidents this month.[85]
- HTS has about 10,000 fighters[86]
- 15th - Turkish forces enter HTS-controlled areas in Idlib and establish 12 observation posts as part of joint agreement between Russia, Turkey, and Iran to create"de-escalation" zones in Syria.[87]
- 19th
    - HTS fighters attacked SAF soldiers in Hamah,[88] claiming that attacks were carried out in retaliation for an agreement between the Syrian government, Russia, Iran, and Turkey.
    - HTS fighters attack the Hamah Military Airport near Hamah city.[89]
    - HTS fighters attack Syrian Army posts in Tleisia, Hamah.[90]
    - HTS fighters attack Syrian Army posts in Al-Talla, Hamah.[91]
    - HTS fighters attack Syrian Army posts in Kahira, Hamah.[92]

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[78] Keser and Fakhoury - "Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) from an Insurgent Group to a Local Authority: Emergence, Development and Social Support Base"
[79] Counter Extremism Project
[80] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[81] BAAD
[82] BAAD
[83] BAAD
[84] Counter Extremism Project
[85] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[86] Counter Extremism Project
[87] Wilson Center - HTS: Evolution of a Jihadi Group
[88] BAAD
[89] BAAD
[90] BAAD
[91] BAAD
[92] BAAD

- 28th - *HTS fighters attack SAF soldiers in Ein Tarma, Damascus, killing at least 50 soldiers.[93]

October 2017
- 234 HTS-linked violent incidents this month.[94]
- 6th - HTS fighters attack Abu Dali village in Hamah.
- 8th -
  - *HTS fighters opened fire on Turkish Armed Forces soldiers near Deir Hassan Camp in Ad Dana, Idlib.[95]
  - *HTS fighters fire projectiles at Turkish Armed Forces near the border crossing in Bab-Hawa, Idlib.[96]
- HTS fights with ISIS and with the Assad regime forces in Hama.[97]
- HTS leader Sheikh Hashim al-Sheikh resigns from leadership, succeeded by Abu Muhammad al-Julani.[98]
- HTS escorts Turkish Army units as part of Turkish de-escalation deployments into Idlib.[99]

November 2017
- 338 HTS-linked violent incidents this month.[100]
- 2nd- The Syrian Salvation Government is formed by HTS and allied groups. The government is based in the Idlib governorate.[101]
- 3rd - HTS suicide bomber detonates vehicle with explosives at SAF checkpoint in Hadar, Quneitra, after which HTS fighters with rockets and firearms attacked the village.[102]
- 27th
  - HTS launches a counter-offensive against ISIS in north Hama.[103]
  - HTS loses two towns to attacking regime forces.[104]
- 29th - HTS launches a counter-attack on regime forces, capturing the two towns they lost.[105]

December 2017
- 193 HTS-linked violent incidents this month.[106]

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[93] BAAD
[94] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[95] BAAD
[96] BAAD
[97] Counter Extremism Project
[98] Mapping Militants - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
[99] Clingendael - Turkey and the armed Syrian opposition: Salafi jihadist groups
[100] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[101] Mapping Militants - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
[102] BAAD
[103] Counter Extremism Project
[104] Counter Extremism Project
[105] Counter Extremism Project
[106] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)

- 5th - HTS Faction Jaish Al Badia defects, voices support for Al Qaeda.[107]
- 10th - *HTS abducts Hassam Mohmoud and Hassan Younis in Idlib.[108]
- 12th
    - SSG gives the Syrian Interim Government 72 hour deadline to cease operations (SIG also alternative to Asad government).[109]
    - *HTS abducts Bakr Younis from Idlib.[110]
- 13th - *HTS abducts Amjed al-Maleh in Idlib.[111]
- 20th - *HTS abducts Ali Al Dalati in Idlib.[112]
- 26th - HTS abducts activist and HTS-critic Samer al-Salloum in Kaft Nabl, Idlib.[113]
- 30th - *HTS suicide bomber detonates explosive bulldozer at Syrian Army base in Harasta, Damacus, and *HTS fighters then attacked the base.[114]

2018

January 2018
- 174 HTS-linked violent incidents this month.[115]
- 1st - HTS joins the operation room to counter the SAF offensive towards Idlib's Abu Duhur's airport.[116]
- 8th - *HTS fighters attacked a SAF vehicle management base in Harasta, Damascus.[117]
- Russian airstrikes increase in the first week of January.[118]
- 28th - *HTS suicide bomber detonates explosive vehicle at SAF management base in Harasta, Damascus.[119]
- 31st- HTS executes two people accused of assassinating HTS fighters.[120]
- HTS fights Ahrar al-Sham and Harakat Nuri al-Din al Zenki, who had joined to form the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF).[121]
- HTS establishes the Watad Petroleum Company, which is granted rights to import oil derivatives and gas from Turkey into North West Syria.[122] [123]

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[107] Counter Extremism Project
[108] BAAD
[109] Syria Direct - HTS-backed civil authority moves against rivals in latest power grab in northwest Syria
[110] BAAD
[111] BAAD
[112] BAAD
[113] BAAD
[114] BAAD
[115] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[116] Counter Extremism Project
[117] BAAD
[118] Syrian Archive - Russian Airstrikes Database
[119] BAAD
[120] Counter Extremism Project
[121] Mapping Militants - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
[122] Middle East Institute - The Economics of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
[123] Haid Haid - "Watad: The oil company that came from nowhere and became a key player in Syria"

February 2018
- 153 HTS-linked violent incidents this month.[124]
- 2nd- HTS clash with civilians of Binnish as they protest HTS, killing one civilian.[125]
- 3rd - HTS fighters shot down a Russian Air Force Fighter Jet over Murrat al-Numan, Idlib.[126]
- 5th - Assailants attempted to attack SAF outposts in Tal Sultan, Idlib, but were repelled.[127]
- 20th - HTS launches attacks on HTS fights Ahrar al-Sham and Harakat Nuri al-Din al Zenki, who had joined to form the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF).[128][129]
- Russian airstrikes on Syria increase in the first week of February.[130]
- Several Al Qaeda- loyal combat units defected from HTS to form Hurras al-Din (HD).
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March 2018
- 109 HTS-linked violent incidents this month.[131]
- 1st- HTS kills several SLF fighters and takes control of several towns in Idlib.[132]
- 16th - HTS fighters attacked SAF soldiers in Hamoryah, Damascus.[133]
- HTS fights Ahrar al-Sham and Harakat Nuri al-Din al Zenki, who had joined to form the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF) in February of 2018.[134]
- 22nd - HTS attacks SLF held towns in west Aleppo, wounding several civilians.[135]
- HTS fighters in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta were allowed to return to Idlib after a ceasefire was negotiated with the Syrian Government Forces (SGF).[136]

April 2018
- 101 HTS-linked violent incidents this month.[137]
- 1st - HTS detains the negotiating committee of SLF in Idlib.[138]
- 6th- HTS and SLF attack each other in Idlib.[139]
- 7th - HTS and SLF reach a one week ceasefire, ending 49 days of infighting.[140]

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[124] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[125] Counter Extremism Project
[126] BAAD
[127] BAAD
[128] Mapping Militants - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
[129] Counter Extremism Project
[130] Syrian Archive - Russian Airstrikes Database
[131] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[132] Counter Extremism Project
[133] BAAD
[134] Mapping Militants - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
[135] Counter Extremism Project
[136] Wilson Center - HTS: Evolution of a Jihadi Group
[137] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[138] Counter Extremism Project
[139] Counter Extremism Project
[140] Counter Extremism Project

- 15th - HTS launches a new wave of attacks against SLF, capturing towns in Idlib.[141]
- 24th - HTS signs peace agreement with Jabhat Tahrir Suriya (JTS/SLF).[142]
- 28th - *HTS assailants abducted photojournalists Ahmad al Akhras and Rami al-Rusian east of Darkush, Idlib.[143]
- 30th - HTS releases Abu Azzam Saraqib, Ahrar Al Sham's commander, and 6 other men after holding them for 8 months[144]
- Ongoing fighting between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham and Harakat Nuri al-Din al Zenki, who had joined to form the SLF in February of 2018.[145]
- Syrian Liberation Front (SLF) captured several villages from HTS in Idlib and Aleppo governorates, fighting between SLF and HTS ends.[146]

Notes:
- Any "*HTS" indicates that sources attributed the attack to HTS, but that HTS did not outwardly claim responsibility. "HTS" alone represents attacks for which HTS claimed responsibility.

May 2018
- 31 HTS-linked violent incidents this month.[147]

June 2018
- 48 HTS-linked violent incidents this month.[148]
- HTS turns its hawala (money transfer) company into Sham Bank to facilitate transactions of Watad Petroleum Company.[149]

July 2018
- 50 HTS-linked violent incidents this month.[150]

August 2018
- 53 HTS-linked violent incidents this month.[151]
- HTS completes goal of removal of Iranian militias and militants from towns of Fu'a and Kafriya in the Idlib governorate.[152]

October 2018

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[141] Counter Extremism Project
[142] Counter Extremism Project
[143] BAAD
[144] Counter Extremism Project
[145] Wilson Center - HTS: Evolution of a Jihadi Group
[146] Mapping Militants - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
[147] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[148] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[149] Middle East Institute - The Economics of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
[150] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[151] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[152] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)

- HTS engages in campaign against ISIL and its allies.[153]
- HTS has between 12,000 and 15,000 militants.[154]

November 2018
- In late 2018, HTS allows Turkish soldiers to enter Idlib and uphold a ceasefire as part of the Astana Process.[155]

December 2018

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[153] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[154] CSIS - Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)
[155] European Council on Foreign Relations - HAYAT TAHRIR AL-SHAM (SYRIA)