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A NEW ERA?

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“ABOUT JPS

There is often a significant gap between political transformations, both domestic and international, and the knowledge produced by researchers, academics, and specialists regarding social issues and phenomena. Despite the proliferation of many journals in the human and social sciences, there is a shortage of publications that provide deep, research-based knowledge and perspectives, that offer valuable alternatives and recommendations to decision-makers across various policy dimensions.

The Jordanian Politics & Society Magazine (JPS), published periodically by the Politics and Society Institute, aims to fill this gap. JPS serves as a scientific platform dedicated to fostering rigorous intellectual debate on issues related to domestic and foreign policies at regional and international levels, with a particular focus on the Jordanian political landscape. The magazine emphasizes the development of scientific and intellectual concepts to address various real-world variables and promotes the exchange of ideas and interactive efforts among specialists.

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The Political Transformation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: Implications for Islamism in the Middle East

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The ascent of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to power in Syria—and the appointment of the leader of this formerly Salafi-jihadist armed faction as president, alongside regional and international recognition —represents a profoundly significant event. It marks a distinct departure from what the Arab world has witnessed since the post-colonial period and the emergence of post-independence states. This development may signal a turning point not only for political Islam in Syria but across multiple Arab countries. Notably, this qualitative shift coincides with the ongoing Israeli war on Gaza and the potential strategic outcomes it may produce for other Islamist movements in the region, particularly

those with markedly different ideological and political orientations, such as Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

This analysis aims to explore the implications of HTS's rise and the appointment of its leader, Ahmad al-Shar', as Syria's head of state. It poses central questions about the upcoming phase, the behaviour of HTS in power, and its influence on domestic political Islam in Syria, as well as broader implications for Islamist movements across the Arab region. We will engage with key questions: What are the consequences of HTS assuming power in Syria and Ahmad al-Shar' becoming president for the models and trajectories of political Islam? What consequences does this

hold for the future of Islamist politics in Syria? And how has the timing—coinciding with the Gaza war—affected the future orientation of political Islam more broadly?

This article is based on the hypothesis of regional contagion in political transition processes—a concept akin to the “wave theory” outlined in Samuel Huntington’s renowned book *The Third Wave: Democratisation in the Late Twentieth Century*. If we consider three pivotal developments—the collapse of the Assad regime and the rise of former jihadists to power; the post-war trajectory of Hamas; and the decline of the “Axis of Resistance” alongside questions about Hezbollah’s future—then we may be witnessing the beginning of new intellectual trends, ideological shifts, and transformations in the sociological landscape of Islamist movements. On the other hand, these significant developments in political Islam coincide with a broader decline in democratic conditions across the Arab world. Following the 2011 Arab Spring—which brought Islamists to power through the ballot box, only to see them ousted by military intervention (as in Egypt in 2013), or through electoral defeat followed by repression (as in Tunisia under President Kais Saied)—many states have descended into civil war, such as Yemen, Libya,

and Sudan. This period can be viewed as a counter-revolutionary backlash—an aggressive reversal of the brief democratic openings that had emerged. Islamist movements that had championed democratic engagement were often central actors in this wave and, arguably, its biggest losers.



HTS demonstrated a remarkable degree of flexibility in addressing both internal and external imperatives, significantly departing from the ideological rigidity of Salafi jihadism—indeed, even from traditional political Islam—in both its foreign policy (including relations with Arab states and Türkiye) and its domestic handling of Syria’s religious, sectarian, and ethnic diversity

In light of this, the critical question emerges: What conclusions and beliefs might be forming among a new generation of young Islamists across the Arab world? Especially when they witness the success of an armed “jihadist” movement in overthrowing a regime and seizing power, while democratic Islamist models repeatedly fail across the region?

The Transformations of al-Sharaa and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: How Far Will They Go?



Despite the Muslim Brotherhood's repeated affirmations—both regionally and globally—of its commitment to peaceful democratic change and its rejection of armed struggle, the events in Gaza and the aftermath of 7 October, including the weakening of Hamas's military wing and the mounting uncertainty over its future, are likely to embolden radical currents within the Brotherhood

With the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime on 8 December 2024, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a Salafi-jihadist movement, entered a new phase, distinct in every way from its previous trajectory. Although the group had governed the Idlib province (home to nearly three million people), this experience cannot be compared to ruling over a diverse, multifaceted society and a state the size of Syria. The country's strategic location, its entanglement during its 13-year civil war with various regional and international agendas, and its long periods of partial fragmentation—especially

during the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) between 2014 and 2017—make it an exceptional case. Large parts of Syria remain under conditions of internal disorder, fragmented authority, and complex foreign relations. The country is also subject to severe international economic sanctions, most of which have been temporarily lifted recently, leaving it in a dire financial, economic, and infrastructural condition, with nearly half the population displaced or living as refugees⁽¹⁾.

The new interim government announced a transitional phase lasting several years, after which elections and a political transformation process would commence. Although the constitutional declaration issued on 13 March 2025 does not explicitly refer to democracy, it implicitly adopts the minimum requirements of a modern civil political system, based on citizenship, constitutionalism, and the separation of powers. None of these elements is traditionally part of the ideological foundation of jihadist movements.

HTS thus found itself not merely replacing one authoritarian regime with another, but confronting

¹ More than 7.4 million Syrians remain internally displaced in their own country where 70 percent of the population is in need of humanitarian assistance and 90 percent live below the poverty line. More than 6 million Syrian refugees live in countries neighboring Syria including Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq or abroad. See: UNHCR. "Syria Refugee Crisis Explained." Last modified March 13, 2025. <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>

a much deeper crisis: a collapsing state, profound internal disarray, a devastated economy, and the legacy of a sectarian, geographically-entrenched, and authoritarian regime. The state faces a bankrupt treasury, bloated bureaucracy, extreme poverty rates nearing 90%, and broken, corrupt security and military institutions. Compounding these issues is an expansionist Israeli agenda seeking to take advantage of the current vulnerability to ensure the emergence of a weak and incapacitated neighbour. In light of this, the desired transformation seems more akin to rebuilding the state, the nation, and national identity, rather than merely transitioning from one regime to another.

HTS demonstrated a remarkable degree of flexibility in addressing both internal and external imperatives, significantly departing from the ideological rigidity of Salafi jihadism—indeed, even from traditional political Islam—in both its foreign policy (including relations with Arab states and Türkiye) and its domestic handling of Syria’s religious, sectarian, and ethnic diversity. Under the leadership of HTS head Ahmed al-Sharaa, the new regime has managed many of these imperatives with notable competence, despite the group’s lack of political experience, having originated as a militant organisation rather than a political party.

Significant hurdles remain in rebuilding the state and nation. It is essential that much of the external support—from the United States, Arab states, and Türkiye, though not from Israel or Iran—is oriented toward bolstering this new trajectory. This includes economic and financial aid, lifting sanctions, training new security forces, and potentially supporting investment and reconstruction efforts, all while enhancing



However, with the military confrontation deepening between Israel and Iran, it is likely to draw many Islamist movements and social groups toward renewed conviction in the necessity of force, including armed struggle, as the only viable means to confront Israel.

the political legitimacy of the new regime. Moreover, the yearning for change and progress is not limited to the Sunni majority; it is shared by Alawites, Kurds, and Druze who have all paid a high price during more than seventy years of dictatorship and over thirteen years of civil war. This shared desire represents a crucial dynamic driving positive momentum toward unity, stability, and state reconstruction.

This is the political backdrop against which the future of political Islam in Syria must be considered. It is difficult to assess the implications without reference to these surrounding conditions. Projecting clear and specific scenarios for political Islam's future in Syria—and its broader regional impact—is a daunting task, given the numerous and fluid domestic and external variables. Still, several observations offer early signals and help frame the debate.



While each Arab case has its unique conditions and context, the «contagion theory» is worth considering. The success of HTS's model may encourage other Islamic movements to embrace greater political pragmatism and to abandon ideological or doctrinal rigidity—even in the context of democratic transformation

1. The Predicament of Civil Democratic Islam

The triumph of HTS in toppling the authoritarian Assad regime through armed struggle—coinciding with the failure of Islamic movements pursuing democratic pathways and the current deadlock in democratic transitions—may reinforce the perception among many young

Islamists that force, revolution, and armed resistance are the most effective means of achieving political change. This belief is further fuelled by the outcomes of other Arab political experiments and, more recently, by the inability of Arab governments to protect Palestinians or deter the Zionist project. Together, these experiences could ignite a new wave of youth anger and internal disillusionment, energised by the apparent success of militant action.

Despite the Muslim Brotherhood's repeated affirmations—both regionally and globally—of its commitment to peaceful democratic change and its rejection of armed struggle, the events in Gaza and the aftermath of 7 October, including the weakening of Hamas's military wing and the mounting uncertainty over its future, are likely to embolden radical currents within the Brotherhood. This includes, for example, the Kamalist wing, which has long advocated for more confrontational protest tactics and direct confrontation with governments. While this radicalism does not necessarily entail adopting the methods of armed Islamist groups like Egypt's Islamic Jihad or al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, it does reflect a growing sense of despair with the democratic route and a shift toward more confrontational, revolutionary alternatives. It

is likely that many now believe that reform has failed and that only revolutionary upheaval remains a viable path forward.

This inclination is further strengthened by what might be described as the "Trumpist shift" in global politics: the increasing abandonment by the United States of its liberal democratic rhetoric on human rights and freedoms, coupled with the rise of far-right movements in Europe and the entrenchment of extremist right-wing politics in Israel. These global dynamics have only deepened the current crisis within democratic Islamist circles, reinforcing ideas that valorise force and militancy among younger generations.

Another significant and closely related variable influencing the future of political Islam in the region—particularly in light of Syria's transformation—is the state of regional peace and security. Should American-Iranian negotiations over the nuclear file succeed and result in a broader regional deal, this may reduce tensions and stabilise the environment. However, with the military confrontation deepening between Israel and Iran, it is likely to draw many Islamist movements and social groups toward renewed conviction in the necessity of force, including armed struggle, as the only viable means to confront Israel.

2. The HTS Model and Islamic Pragmatism

In contrast to the perceived failure of democratic Islam, the success of HTS in seizing power—followed by its reconciliation with the Arab region and the significant political concessions it made both domestically and externally—signals that this model may become highly appealing to other Islamic currents. It exemplifies a path toward greater political pragmatism and detachment from the ideological underpinnings that historically shaped both Islamist and even jihadist movements.



Returning to the HTS governance model, it is clear that HTS's governance model isn't as extreme as the Taliban's, but it also falls short of being fully democratic. It represents a middle ground between hardline Islamist rule and inclusive political pluralism.

It is important to emphasise that pragmatism does not necessarily equate to democracy or civility. Instead, it reflects political realism and a shedding of rigid ideological commitments. HTS, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra, and previously linked to both

ISIS and al-Qaeda when all were part of a unified jihadist front, once viewed Arab governments as Western puppets and considered fighting them part of its mission against the "distant enemy" (the United States). Today, however, HTS has recently developed strong relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, and it seeks rapprochement with the United States. De-escalates tensions with Israel and prioritises economic and service-



Just as «Wilayat Khorasan» has become the primary security threat to Taliban rule in Afghanistan, ISIS may emerge as the principal security challenge to al-Sharaa's new order in Syria

oriented governance. These dramatic ideological reversals—if successful in Syria—could inspire many Islamist movements to abandon their traditional ideological rhetoric in favour of political deals that allow them to remain part of the political landscape in other Arab countries.

While each Arab case has its unique conditions and context, the "contagion theory" is worth

considering. The success of HTS's model may encourage other Islamic movements to embrace greater political pragmatism and to abandon ideological or doctrinal rigidity—even in the context of democratic transformation. Some groups may come to accept coexistence with authoritarian regimes and offer concessions, particularly if armed struggle has proven costly and ineffective in stronger states, and if democratic openings remain indefinitely postponed. These movements may then seek alternative strategies or conceptual frameworks, and the HTS experience could serve as a persuasive model.

Moreover, the rise of pragmatism has become more pronounced among Salafi currents in the post-Arab Spring era, even more so than among ideologically driven movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Take, for instance, Egypt's Salafi al-Nour Party, which allied itself with the new regime and abandoned much of its ideological rigidity during the early Arab Spring period (2011–2013), while the Muslim Brotherhood entered a fierce confrontation with the government and paid a heavy price. Al-Nour, in contrast, remains a legal and recognised political actor. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, Salafi groups once vehemently opposed social modernisation on religious grounds but are now

showing considerable flexibility in adapting to the sweeping reforms led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Returning to the HTS governance model, it is clear that HTS's governance model isn't as extreme as the Taliban's, but it also falls short of being fully democratic. It represents a middle ground between hardline Islamist rule and inclusive political pluralism. Several factors preclude this, including the nature of the regime transition, the legacy of authoritarianism, and the role of regional Arab actors who, despite supporting HTS, are not proponents of democracy. Consequently, the new model may come to resemble what political theorists call "authoritarian pluralism," akin to many existing Arab regimes.

Ahmed al-Sharaa is reported to have privately told Arab diplomats that he considers the Turkish governance model the most suitable for Syria⁽²⁾. That model—anchored in the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which officially abandoned Islamic ideology in favour of what might be termed "moderate secularism"—features democratic elections and political pluralism. However, it also exhibits a system marked by strong presidential authority and

centralised executive control under Erdoğan, as well as persistent issues with media freedoms, civil liberties, and social integration.

Ultimately, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the nature of the emerging Syrian political system. Much will depend on consensus over the rules of political engagement, the role of civil society, and the status of other Islamic movements, such as whether the Muslim Brotherhood, banned in many Arab states and on hostile terms with the current U.S. administration under Donald Trump, will be permitted to operate in Syria. Will HTS transform into a conservative political party under al-Shar's leadership, emulating Erdoğan's party in Türkiye? The number of open questions makes precise forecasting extraordinarily difficult, except for conditional analysis along the lines of "if-then".

3. The Impact of the Syrian Victory on the Future of the Jihadist Current

Any forward-looking analysis must not overlook the most significant global jihadist actor today: the Islamic State (ISIS). For a time, it was HTS's ideological and operational counterpart within jihadist circles. However, HTS eventually

2 Confidential diplomat interview, Feb. 2025.

distanced itself from ISIS, and later from the global jihadist movement as a whole, severing ties with both ISIS and al-Qaeda. HTS narrowed its objective to fighting the Syrian regime and, even before the fall of Bashar al-Assad, began efforts to normalise its relations with the West and the regional environment by emphasising its flexibility, pragmatism, and complete disassociation from transnational jihadist agendas.

HTS was not alone in pursuing a trajectory of normalising ties with regional neighbours and Western actors. The Taliban, too, succeeded in toppling the Afghan regime after two decades of war and reached an agreement with the United States, trading a commitment to exclude al-Qaeda and other foreign military actors in exchange for complete control over Afghanistan's domestic affairs. This model inspired HTS: one of its key ideologues, Abu Abd al-Rahim Atoun, even proposed a new classification within jihadist movements—alongside the two dominant poles of ISIS and al-Qaeda—termed "moderate local Salafi jihadism"⁽³⁾. In this category, he placed the Taliban, HTS, and even Hamas (viewed as a jihadist group fighting the Israeli occupation in Palestine without conducting external

operations). Yet, HTS arguably went further than the Taliban by relinquishing a significant portion of its ideological commitment to establishing an Islamic state, which the Taliban continues to uphold.

While al-Qaeda appears to be in a state of decline following the killing of its second leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in 2022, ISIS remains active in several regions of the world, including Iraq and Syria, despite the collapse of its so-called caliphate and the deaths of many of its senior leaders. It has a presence in Afghanistan, Africa, Yemen, and Somalia, and other parts of Africa, and continues to embody the core of global jihadism. ISIS is likely to exploit HTS's ideological compromises and political deals as evidence to reinforce its claim that HTS is a deviant, even treasonous, entity aligned with Western and Arab governments.

ISIS will likely seek to capitalise on HTS's ideological shift, the war in Gaza, the closing off of democratic horizons in the Arab world, and perceived America's alignment with Israel and retreat from advocating democracy. With its powerful media apparatus, ISIS is well-positioned to weaponise these narratives.

3 Abu Rumman, Mohammad. "Did Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham Succeed in Gaining International Rehabilitation?" September 12, 2023. <https://wp.me/pdSluF-1BR>.

Just as "Wilayat Khorasan" has become the primary security threat to Taliban rule in Afghanistan, ISIS may emerge as the principal security challenge to al-Sharaa's new order in Syria. If the new regime manages to integrate Kurds, Alawites, and Druze into its political system, this threat may be contained. However, suppose it fails to do so or Syria descends into renewed conflict. In that case, ISIS will likely exploit the resulting vacuum to recruit both foreign and local fighters who reject HTS's trajectory. In doing so, it would aim to occupy the "far-right" space vacated by HTS's transformation.

Conclusion

The rise of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham as the central actor in post-Assad Syria marks a critical moment in the evolution of jihadist and Islamist movements in the region. HTS's transformation from a Salafi-jihadist militia into a semi-governing authority engaging in regional diplomacy and state-building reflects a shift not only in strategy but also in ideological orientation. This transition, although still in flux, suggests that rigid Islamist models may give way to more pragmatic and

politically adaptive forms of governance, even among formerly radical groups.

This ideological recalibration, shaped by HTS's political concessions and efforts to reconcile with diverse Syrian constituencies and regional actors, is likely to resonate across the broader Islamic political landscape. For movements long wedded to either militant revolution or procedural democracy, HTS's hybrid model, somewhere between authoritarian pluralism and conservative Islamist governance, presents an alternative pathway that may appeal to actors disillusioned by the failures of democratic transitions or deterred by the futility of armed insurgency.

At the same time, this shift creates new risks. By abandoning core jihadist doctrines, HTS risks being delegitimised by transnational jihadist movements, particularly ISIS, which may exploit this shift to recruit among those alienated by HTS's moderation. Whether HTS's model consolidates or collapses will shape not only Syria's political future but also the ideological choices of Islamist movements throughout the Middle East.

“ ABOUT PSI

Politics and Society Institute (PSI), is a Jordanian nonprofit, policy and research organization established to advance practical research, innovative ideas and realistic solutions toward building a more prosperous Jordan and a stable region.

The Institute is an independent organization that aims to deepen the understanding of public policy and decision-making processes and to build a better knowledge platform of domestic and regional dynamics that will define our future.

The Institute advances its mission guided by the values of the rule of law, civil society, good governance, and moderation. It provides an innovative, integrated, and global approach to its analysis of complex trends and transformations with particular attention to youth dynamics.

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