

Breaking out: Is Syria's Hayat Tahrir al-Sham moving away from Jihad and Sharia law?

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As Syria's new Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) led-government tentatively explores governance away from jihad and strict Sharia law, the reactions from extremist factions have been notably severe and revealing. Sami al-



'Uraydi, leader of Syria's Tanzim Hurras al-Din (sometimes referred to as Al-Qaeda in Syria), has vocally opposed any deviation from Sharia, embodying a "*Sharia or martyrdom*" stance. His fierce rhetoric divulges a broader unease among jihad-aligned groups, fearing the dilution of their ideological purity and influence.

Similarly, the re-emergence of footage featuring Qasim al-Raymi, the late leader of Al-Qaeda in Yemen (killed in 2020 in a US airstrike), echoes a staunch rejection of democracy or secularism as a viable form of governance. Al-Raymi's message, posthumously broadcasted, not only criticised the adoption of non-Islamic governance but also lambasts regional powers like the Gulf states for their rapprochement with Bashar al-Assad's regime. His pointed condemnation extends to other leaders in the region, notably Egypt's Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Saudi Arabia's Muhammad bin Salman, whom he calls tyrants needing to be removed.

These pronouncements from jihadist leaderships are not just ideological manifestos but communications aimed at rallying support and discouraging any acceptance of political transitions that could stabilise Syria without a jihadist framework. The insistence on a return to 'true Islam' reflects a deep-seated anxiety over losing ground both ideologically and territorially.

At the peak of rebel and ISIS control between 2014-2017, some 30-40% of the country was under jihadist and sharia law. From 2018-2021 - post-ISIS decline - this reduced to less than 10%. Now Syria has, for the most part, been a secular led nation with just pockets of the country - some 5% - under sharia law in northwestern areas like Idlib and Aleppo. New HTS leader, President Ahmad al-Sharaa (also known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani), has renounced ties to Al-Qaeda and has promised to rule with moderation to include protecting minorities.

Stakeholders and dynamics

The evolving political landscape in Syria engages a broad spectrum of stakeholders whose positions and reactions will significantly shape the country's future and its international relations.

Al-Qaeda in Yemen's position: this faction maintains a hardline stance, viewing any deviation from strict Sharia governance in Syria as a fundamental betrayal of jihadist principles. Their position is crucial as it influences jihadist sentiments across the region, potentially inciting further conflict or inspiring solidarity among like-minded groups. Al-Qaeda in Yemen's rhetoric often serves as a rallying cry for resistance against perceived Western influences and governance in the Islamic world.

Role and influence of Hurras al-Din: Hurras al-Din, representing some of the most uncompromising elements within Syria's jihadist spectrum, plays a pivotal role in the ongoing global jihadist cause. Their rejection of a non-Islamic governance underscores the deep ideological divide and the challenges facing any peace initiatives in Syria. The group's influence is significant, affecting on-the-ground military dynamics and the broader jihadist narrative within and beyond Syrian borders.

International responses: responses from global actors like the United States (US) and the United Nations (UN) are multi-layered, involving diplomatic efforts, sanctions and, at times, military interventions. These responses aim to get Syria back on its feet while at the same time dealing with the local allegiances and international rivalries. Additionally, regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt watch Syria's progress closely, as changes there could force them to reconsider their own security strategies and regional influence.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), under Commander Mazloun Abdi, advocate for a secular, civil and decentralised Syrian state. They emphasise the importance of the US troop presence to prevent an Islamic State resurgence and express a desire for ongoing negotiations to shape Syria's future inclusively. This stance positions them as a key force in shaping post-conflict governance and influencing regional security.

Current situation - Syria at a crossroads

Following the ousting of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, HTS assumed control, with Ahmad al-Sharaa emerging as the interim president. HTS has initiated efforts to establish an inclusive government, aiming to lift Western sanctions and facilitate reconstruction. This includes promises of an open economy and peaceful relations with neighbouring countries.

The involvement of global powers such as the US and European Nations show that there are diplomatic efforts aimed at supporting democracy and human rights within Syria. Meanwhile, Russia and Iran, having previously supported the Assad regime, now try to find their way in a new political landscape where their influence is tested against a backdrop of changing alliances.

This shift has led to a new political era where former jihadist rulers and current power brokers negotiate the terms of peace and governance. Signs of weariness towards continuous conflict are emerging among the populace, hinting at a desire for stability and economic recovery once and for all. This evolving scenario presents both challenges and opportunities for establishing a government that can sustain peace.

Impact on Western security and trade

As Syria's newly formed government transitions away from a jihadist-led model, the implications for Western security and for trade are significant. The shift could lead to a recalibration of counterterrorism strategies by Western nations. Further reduced jihadist influence in Syria might decrease parts of the region's role as a breeding ground for extremism that threatens Western interests. However, there is the potential for power vacuums, which could invite other non-state actors or extremist groups to fill the void, necessitating vigilant security measures and international assistance.

Changes in Syria's political landscape could impact key trade routes and energy supply lines that cross the Middle East. A more stable Syria, perceived as less hostile to Western interests, might open new opportunities for trade and energy projects that were previously untenable. Equally, ongoing instability or a shift in alliances might disrupt these routes, affecting global markets and prices. UN Special Envoy, Geir Pedersen, has emphasised that forming an inclusive Syrian government could lead to the lifting of Western sanctions, aiding in the country's reconstruction. Meanwhile, local voices such as Aleppo parish priest, Fr. Bahjat Karakach, warn that sustained international attention is necessary to ensure Syria's transition leads to long-term stability, rather than another cycle of conflict and chaos.

Forecasting Syria's political future

As Syria stands at an important juncture, the future of its political landscape is being manipulated by the tug of war between extremist forces and emerging government. The potential for Syria's new government to maintain extremist rule appears to be waning as internal dissent and international pressure favour a shift toward more inclusive models. However, the resilience of jihadist factions like Tanzim Hurras al-Din could lead to a fragmented power structure, where pockets of extremist control persist. Alternatively, a successful transition to a government incorporating broader democratic principles may stabilise the region and diminish the influence of minority jihadist ideologies.

Global jihad movements' reaction to Syria's HTS shifting political dynamics will be significant. A move away from extremism could lead to a reevaluation of strategies among these groups, possibly intensifying their activities in other regions perceived as more amenable to their agendas. Conversely, the success of a more democratic Syria could serve as a counter-narrative to jihadist ideology, potentially weakening their global appeal and recruitment. That could cause chaos and is what is most concerning.

A stable Syria could lead to enhanced economic co-operation and security partnerships within the Middle East, affecting everything from oil markets to migration patterns. On the global stage, major powers will adjust their foreign policies based on the new Syrian narrative, which could lead to shifts in alliances.

Conclusion

HTS's gradual shift away from jihadist rule, coupled with varying responses from extremist factions, underscores the fluidity of its political situation. Al-Qaeda in Yemen's hardline objections, Tanzim Hurras al-Din's insistence on Sharia - and the emergence of other stakeholders - illustrate the deep ideological rifts that continue to shape the country's way forward. At the same time, global actors, ranging from regional powers to Western nations, are adjusting their approaches to align with new realities on the ground, seeking paths that might yield enduring stability and economic reform.

For senior executives and board members, these developments present both risks and opportunities. On the one hand, diminished extremist control could reduce threats to cross-border trade and investment. On the other, emerging power vacuums and shifting alliances may lead to instability that disrupts markets.

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