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The Rise of Hayy Tahrir al-Sham and Its Implications for Global Security Against Jihadist Terrorism

Introduction

On 8 December 2024, after more than a decade of conflict, one of the most long-lived dictatorial political regimes in the Middle East collapsed, with its supreme leader, Bashar al-Assad, going into exile in Russia, a country whose military support had kept him in power for several years.

The principal actor responsible was Hayy Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an organisation comprising various rebel groups of jihadist ideology and led by the al-Nusrah Front¹ (FaN), the syrian affiliate of Al-Qaeda Central (AQC)² during the syrian conflict until their public split in 2016, whose leader is Ahmad Hussein al-Sharaa @ Abu Muhammad al-Julani³.

The goal of establishing territorial control had previously been pursued by various jihadist terrorist organisations, the most significant case being that of DAESH, which in June 2014 managed to seize vast areas of Syria and Iraq and proclaim an *Islamic caliphate* over the territories under its control.⁴

The international response, coordinated around a coalition led by the United States, culminated in the loss of DAESH's last territorial stronghold in March 2019⁵, although the organisation has continued its terrorist activity through affiliates and followers in various parts of the world.

In the case of HTS, however, something that had until then seemed utopian materialised, making possible the transformation of a terrorist organisation into a political actor whose rise to power not only failed to generate rejection from the international community but actually obtained its recognition.

From that moment on, a series of questions arose concerning the direction Syria might take in the coming years and whether this would affect the threat posed by jihadist

1 BBC News Mundo (08/12/2024). Quiénes son los rebeldes que han entrado en Damasco y han derrocado al régimen de Al-Assad en Siria. BBC. Retrieved on 16/05/2026: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/cn5w51e0wz5o>

2 Blanco Castro, J. R. (2020). La competencia entre Al Qaeda y el Estado Islámico. Revista Del Instituto Español De Estudios Estratégicos, (14), 43–70. Retrieved on <https://revista.ieee.es/article/view/1252>

3 Reuters (28/07/2016). El Frente al Nusrah cambia de nombre tras desligarse de Al Qaeda. El País. Retrieved on 12/05/2026: https://elpais.com/internacional/2016/07/28/actualidad/1469725569_396798.html

4 Hurtado, Lluís Miquel (29/06/2014). El ISIS anuncia su califato de terror. El Mundo. Retrieved on 10/05/2026: <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2014/06/29/53b063cfe2704e2a3a8b4587.html>

5 RFI (23/03/2019). Se derrumba el "califato" de ISIS con la caída de Baghuz. RFI. Retrieved on 23/05/2026: <https://www.rfi.fr/es/oriente-medio/20190323-se-derrumba-el-califato-de-isis-con-la-caida-de-baghuz>

terrorism at the regional and international levels, just as occurred following the Taliban Movement's seizure of power in Afghanistan in the 1990s or in the case of DAESH.

FaN: from AQC Affiliate to Ruling Political Actor in Syria

FaN emerged in 2012, when members of the AQC affiliate in Iraq, then known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), were sent to intervene in the syrian conflict in order to exploit the prevailing instability⁶, displaying a higher level of military effectiveness than most insurgent factions, owing to the experience of its members in Iraq.

From 2013, when ISI became known as DAESH⁷ and announced its break with AQC⁸, FaN became one of the main jihadist forces present in the Syrian conflict.

The rupture between DAESH and AQC was formalised on 3 February 2014, with al-Baghdadi's organisation going on to control large swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq, and declaring the creation of a *caliphate*⁹ in order to obtain the political legitimacy needed to attract the largest possible number of volunteers.

This represented an important milestone for jihadism, in that it succeeded in establishing a proto-state structure in keeping with DAESH's strategy, based on the work *The Management of Savagery* by Abu Bakr al-Naji, published in 2004¹⁰.

6 TALAVERA CEJUDO, Guillermo. La evolución política de HTS en Siria: análisis sobre legitimidad y terrorismo de Estado. Documento de Opinión IEEE 15/2026. Retrieved on 23/05/2026: <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieeee/politica-de-hts-en-siria-2026>

7 Iniciales del nombre en árabe de Estado Islámico de Irak y del Levante.

8 Calvente Moreno, M. (2022). La transformación del movimiento yihadista global. Revista del Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos. N.º 19, pp. 285-318.

9 Ortega, Andrés (07/07/2015). El califato, una idea con territorio. Real Instituto Elcano. Retrieved on 12/05/2026: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/comentarios/el-espectador-global-califato-una-idea-territorio/>

10 Calvente Moreno, M. (2022). La transformación del movimiento yihadista global. Revista del Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos. N.º 19, pp. 285-318.



Image 1. Images from the magazines *Dabiq* and *Islamic State Report* concerning the declaration of the caliphate and the abolition of the colonial borders between Syria and Iraq.

From that point on, the differences between DAESH and AQC deepened¹¹, with the former seeking to establish territorial control in order to expand regionally, while the latter maintained a global agenda, treating territorial implantation as a longer-term objective.

Meanwhile, FaN chose to evolve strategically, remaining an AQC affiliate in Syria and gradually adopting a pragmatic, local path that culminated in its formal separation from AQC in 2016 and in direct conflicts with DAESH.

Following DAESH's declaration of a *caliphate* and the creation of the US-led international coalition to contain its expansion, the organisation began to encourage the carrying out of attacks at a global level, while between 2016 and 2017, al-Sharaa undertook a process of organisational repositioning, transforming FaN into Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, at which point he announced its formal disengagement from AQC, and subsequently into HTS, abandoning the anti-global rhetoric and adopting a Syrian national agenda.

After this disengagement, HTS consolidated its territorial control in north-western Syria, around Idlib, benefiting from Turkey's support, a country with strong interests in the area given its proximity to its border and to the territories controlled by the US-backed Kurdish forces. For this reason, Turkey negotiated an agreement with Russia in 2020 that allowed HTS to maintain its control in that region.¹²

11 Fisk, Z. *ISIS: the terror of ISIS. Assessing the real threat posed by the Islamic state*. P. 242. Blowfish. Versión kindle. 2014.

12 Gritten, David (8/12/2024). 4 claves para entender la crisis en Siria que llevó a los rebeldes a tomar Damasco y al

This meant that, unlike DAESH, HTS remained in the background of the international jihadist landscape, focusing on self-preservation by abandoning global jihad in favour of a local one.

It adapted, seeking to establish relations with external actors and developing a pragmatic system of governance. It attempted to integrate or negotiate with the majority of the forces opposed to the Syrian regime and, when this failed, resorted to force against opposing groups such as Hurras al-Din, linked to AQC, and various DAESH cells.

In HTS, alongside members of FaN, several insurgent factions converged. It controlled critical economic sectors, such as the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, oil and telecommunications, adopted the *Turkish lira* as its currency from 2020¹³ and operated in a *grey zone* based on Ibn Taymiyya's concept of *al-siyasat al-shar'iyya* (policies compatible with sharia), a blend of flexible political positions within a broadly defined religious framework.

It moved from projecting the idea of an *islamic emirate* to that of a *Government of Salvation* in 2017, forging links with local councils, tribal structures and opposition groups, while maintaining its jihadist doctrinal base confined to internal communications.

In this way it developed a strong capacity to manage external perceptions of the political regime it had established in Idlib, laying the groundwork for its subsequent expansion.

The Collapse of the al-Assad Regime and the Consolidation of HTS Power

The fall of al-Assad was not a sudden event but the consequence of structural factors that had been aggravating for years: economic exhaustion from international sanctions¹⁴, systemic corruption, the progressive erosion of the internal cohesion of the armed forces, the reduction of russian and iranian support, and the capacity of HTS to present itself as a viable alternative of order and stability in contrast to the image of brutality and corruption of the syrian regime.

fin del gobierno de Bashar al-Assad. BBC News. Retrieved on 22/05/2026: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/cgkxjy8kvv8o>

13 Lister, Charles (01/09/2021). Twenty Years After 9/11: The Fight for Supremacy in Northwest Syria and the Implications for Global Jihad. CTC Sentinel, Vol. 14, Issue 7. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. Retrieved on 17/05/2026: <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/twenty-years-after-9-11-the-fight-for-supremacy-in-northwest-syria-and-the-implications-for-global-jihad/>

14 TALAVERA CEJUDO, Guillermo. La evolución política de HTS en Siria: análisis sobre legitimidad y terrorismo de Estado. Documento de Opinión IEEE 15/2026. Retrieved on 20/05/2026: <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieee/politica-de-hts-en-siria-2026>

From 27 November 2024, HTS led an offensive, with turkish support¹⁵, which led to the seizure of various cities, including Damascus, and to the fall of a regime that had governed the country for more than fifty years, opening the possibility of implementing across the whole territory the model of governance already in existence in the areas under its control.¹⁶

That offensive took both the syrian security apparatus and the intelligence services of the major powers with interests in the country by surprise.

Al-Sharaa entered Damascus with a sobriety entirely at odds with DAESH's propagandistic excesses, without symbols associated with jihadist ideology, promoting a discourse of national unity and protection of the country's religious and ethnic minorities. This approach initially generated a degree of paralysis in the international community's response, which subsequently gave way to recognition of the new regime.

On 29 January 2025, al-Sharaa was named interim president. In March, a new constitution was adopted for a five-year period which, according to Human Rights Watch, lacked the necessary checks and balances to guarantee judicial independence and the right to political participation, given its concentration of executive power over the other branches of the state, including the president's capacity to appoint one-third of the People's Assembly and all members of the Supreme Constitutional Court.¹⁷

In April 2025, HTS formally dissolved, although its members retained key positions in government (9 of the 23 ministers maintained a direct or indirect link with the organisation, including the portfolios of Foreign Affairs, Defence, Interior and Justice).¹⁸

Al-Sharaa's address to the United Nations in September 2025 represented his formal incorporation into the international community as the recognised ruler of Syria.

15 Mingues, Madison (17/06/2025). Six Months Post-Assad, What's Next for Syria? American University. Retrieved on 22/05/2026: <https://www.american.edu/sis/news/20250617-six-months-post-assad-whats-next-for-syria.cfm>

16 France 24 (16/12/2024). HTS podría replicar el modelo de gobierno de Idlib en el resto de Siria. France 24. Retrieved on 11/05/2026: <https://www.france24.com/es/video/20241216-hts-podr%C3%ADa-replicar-el-modelo-de-gobierno-de-idlib-en-el-resto-de-siria>

17 HRW (08/12/2025). Syria: One Year Since Assad's Fall. HRW. Retrieved on 22/05/2026: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/12/08/syria-one-year-since-assads-fall>

18 Loft, Phillip. Syria: What is the situation five months after Assad's fall. House of Commons Library. Retrieved on 10/05/2026: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/syria-what-is-the-situation-five-months-after-assads-fall/>



Image 2. Al-Sharaa delivering a speech at UN headquarters on 24 September 2025. Image obtained from: <https://www.rfi.fr/es/oriente-medio/20250925-el-presidente-sirio-se-pronuncia-en-la-onu-desatando-manifestaciones-al-margen-de-su-visita>

One of the principal indicators of the true nature of the new government resides in its management of religious and ethnic pluralism. In March 2025, members of the ousted regime launched a low-intensity insurgency in the country's coastal region, where the alawite community represents the majority.

The government's response was swift and violent. Approximately 1,500 alawite individuals lost their lives in what was interpreted as collective punishment of a community considered a bastion of the al-Assad family.¹⁹ International condemnation was widespread, and a United Nations report highlighted the participation in these massacres of HTS affiliates, factions of the Syrian National Army and Hurras al-Din, the AQC affiliate in Syria.²⁰

In December 2025, the new government controlled most of western Syria and the main population centres, while the kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) maintained the north-east and the Syrian National Army controlled areas along the northern border with Turkey. In January 2026, the Syrian government launched an offensive against the SDF,

19 Salih, Mohammed (10/11/2025). Syria's Fragile Transition and the Enduring Minority Question. Foreign Policy Research Institute. Retrieved on 16/05/2026: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/11/syrias-fragile-transition-and-the-enduring-minority-question/>

20 Sharawi, Ahmad (01/08/2025). UN report shows Islamic State and Al Qaeda exploiting post-Assad chaos in Syria. Foundation For Defense of Democracies.

regaining control over much of north-eastern Syria.²¹

The Resurgence of DAESH and AQ

Following the fall of al-Assad, DAESH intensified its activity in Syria, attacking both the new government and members of the christian, alawite and druze minorities, with the aim of exploiting the chaos of the transitional period in order to reconstitute itself.²²

During 2024, Syria was the country with the highest number of fatalities from DAESH actions worldwide. Although between January and April 2025 the organisation's activity declined, it picked up again from June onwards.²³

This behaviour reflected DAESH's rejection of al-Sharaa's transition from jihadist leader to political ruler, whom it labels a *deceitful tyrant* and *agent of Washington*.²⁴

On 30 June 2025, the President of the United States signed an executive order eliminating or suspending a large part of the sanctions imposed on al-Assad's government.²⁵ Likewise, the US, the United Kingdom and the European Union have progressively lifted sanctions against Syria, retaining only those relating to military material, chemical weapons and individuals linked to the previous regime.²⁶

21 Genç, Özge (04/02/2026). "How Damascus Reclaimed Syria's Northeast, and What Integration Now Means". Afkār, Middle East Council on Global Affairs. Retrieved on 08/05/2026: https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/syria-sdf-integration-agreement-2026-analysis/

22 Rose, Caroline y Colin P. Clarke (22/09/2025). "The Return of ISIS". Foreign Affairs. Retrieved on 12/05/2026: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/syria/return-isis>

23 Karam Shaar Advisory Ltd. (31/10/2025). "From Resurgence to Retrenchment: The Evolution of ISIS After Assad's Fall". Syria in Figures, n.º 13. Retrieved on 20/05/2026: <https://karamshaar.com/syria-in-figures/isis-syria-evolution-trends-2025/>

24 Soliman, Ghada (09/2025). "Islamic State Resurgence in a Beleaguered Middle East". Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses 17, n.º 5, pp. 17–22. RSIS. Retrieved on 10/05/2026: <https://rsis.edu.sg/ctta-newsarticle/islamic-state-resurgence-in-a-beleaguered-middle-east/>

25 Humud, Carla E., Christopher M. Blanchard y Mary Beth Dunham Nikitin (26/02/2026). Syria: Transition and U.S. Policy. CRS Report RL33487. Congressional Research Service. Retrieved on 22/05/2026: <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33487>

26 Loft, Philip y Claire Mills (23/07/2025). Syria after Assad: Consequences and Interim Authorities 2025. Research Briefing CBP-10161. House of Commons Library. Retrieved on 04/05/2026: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10161/>



Image 3. Al-Sharaa alongside the President of the United States, Donald Trump, and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman during the latter's visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2025. Image obtained from: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/continuidad-o-ruptura-en-la-siria-de-al-sharaa-entre-la-herencia-de-los-assad-y-la-sombra-de-jolani/>

This normalisation of relations has generated a debate about its implications for global security, the resolution of which depends to a considerable extent on whether al-Sharaa consolidates a path of moderation, abandoning the original jihadist tenets, or whether he maintains them, thereby advancing the global jihadist cause.

Regional Geopolitical Consequences in the Medium and Long Term

The existence of a government led by an organisation of jihadist origin has fundamentally altered the geostrategic situation in the Middle East.

On the one hand, it represents a disruption of Iranian influence in the region, since Syria was essential to the chain of logistical and other support that Iran maintained with the Lebanese organisation Hezbollah, with far-reaching implications for Israel's strategic position.

On the other hand, Turkey, which has maintained a pragmatic relationship with HTS and other factions opposed to al-Assad, may also be affected by the instability generated in Syria, given its direct interests in the border zone.

The contagion effect on other jihadist actors could be one of the most concerning in the medium term. The success of HTS, a terrorist organisation that has survived more than ten years of conflict and managed to seize control of a state and obtain international recognition, constitutes a historical milestone within jihadism comparable to DAESH's declaration of a *caliphate*.

This could generate an *emulation effect* among other jihadist organisations and groups. The fact that state power can be seized through a combination of sustained military capability, effective management of external perceptions and exploitation of structural state weaknesses conveys the message that this path is also possible in other contexts.

On the other hand, the situation of the christian, alawite, druze and kurdish communities under the new regime represents one of the most uncertain aspects of the new Syrian political reality. While al-Sharaa promoted discourses of reconciliation and inclusion after the seizure of power, this contrasts with HTS's ideology and its conduct during the period of control over Idlib, where civil liberties were largely restricted and aspects of sharia were applied that affected the rights of women and minorities.²⁷

A development towards radical islamism could evolve into discrimination or persecution of these communities, triggering a new cycle of internal conflict and mass displacement with a direct impact, as occurred a few years ago, on security and migration in the West.

As regards the implications for the evolution of global jihadist terrorism, one must consider the historical debate within jihadism between combating the *near enemy* and the *far enemy*, a debate that reached its highest expression in the 11 September 2001 attacks, planned by AQC within the framework of a global jihad.

DAESH modulated that strategy, initially prioritising the *near enemy* by seeking territorial establishment in order to expand regionally before, following the creation of the international coalition against it, broadening its activity against the *far enemy* by fostering an international campaign of attacks.

The HTS model suggests a third strategic path, centred on the construction of state capacity as a prior and indispensable element for subsequent external projection. It has been demonstrated that it is possible to seize control of a state without triggering an immediate Western military response, provided that the messages directed externally are adequately managed and any act that might provoke a direct international reaction is avoided.

The fact of having maintained the necessary strategic patience, waiting for the ideal conditions to take control of a country, is a highly significant element in terms of other

27 EUROPOL. TE-SAT 2024. Retrieved on 09/05/2026: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publication-events/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2024-eu-te-sat>

organisations and groups seeking to do the same in other parts of the world.

As occurred in Afghanistan following the soviet-afghan jihad, in Iraq following the US invasion, or with the rise of DAESH in Syria, the country could once again become an epicentre of radicalisation, indoctrination and jihadist training.

Despite the fact that HTS's profile is far more discreet than DAESH's, the consolidation of a state governed by an organisation of jihadist origin in the Western Mediterranean represents a significant opportunity for global jihadism in terms of recruitment and ideological irradiation.

For all these reasons, the West faces a complex dilemma. From a pragmatic perspective, the advisable course of action might be to engage in dialogue with the new Syrian authorities in order to prevent a possible radical drift and to stop other powers from increasing their influence in the region.

However, al-Sharaa appeared for several years on international lists of individuals wanted for jihadist terrorism before being removed from them.²⁸ This precedent is enormously dangerous for the established democratic international order, as it legitimises the idea that a jihadist leader can obtain international recognition if he manages his image adequately for a sufficient period of time.

A more coherent approach might consist in demanding measurable guarantees and normative adaptations in the field of human rights, with particular attention to the rights of women and ethnic and religious minorities, as well as concrete evidence of disengagement from jihadism as a prerequisite for full recognition and the progressive lifting of sanctions.

Europe's security structures adapted to respond to the threat represented by DAESH, materialised in high-profile attacks by small cells or individuals, encouraged through its propaganda apparatus and with little direct link to the organisation.

The HTS model is different and poses greater challenges, including greater strategic patience, a broader time horizon in achieving objectives and infiltration of state structures. This evolution may entail a new adaptation of the analytical and operational frameworks

28 Naciones Unidas (06/11/2025). Security Council Adopts Resolution 2799 (2025), Removing Syria's Transitional President, Interior Minister from ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida Sanctions List. Retrieved on 22/05/2026: <https://press.un.org/en/2025/sc16214.doc.htm>

and procedures of western intelligence and security services.

An additional element of complexity is the legal status of HTS. While it appeared on lists of terrorist organisations, there were clear legal consequences for its members and for those who interacted with it. Following its removal from the United Nations list²⁹, that legal framework has been left in suspense, creating a zone of legal uncertainty with direct implications for the counter-terrorism policies of western countries.

Conclusions

The seizure of power in Syria by a jihadist terrorist organisation and the subsequent international recognition of the government it has established has represented a fundamental change and a milestone of particular relevance for jihadism.

This event, achieved through force of facts, once again demonstrates the capacity for adaptation displayed by jihadist terrorism and its ability to evolve in accordance with the situation in which it finds itself.

The adaptation of the identity discourse, the modification of strategic objectives and the modulation of the time frames for achieving them constitute the basis of HTS's strategic success in attaining its goals.

This entails, on the part of intelligence and security services, an adaptation to the new type of threat they may be required to confront, both in the syrian case and in others that may arise.

On the other hand, account must also be taken of the fact that Syria is in a rather precarious state, with an economy devastated by more than ten years of conflict, largely destroyed infrastructure, a traumatised and divided society and the presence of hostile actors both within its territory and beyond.

This could lead to the failure of the state-building project led by HTS and to the emergence of a new period of instability that could be exploited by organisations such as DAESH to re-establish themselves in this territory.

For all these reasons, monitoring and tracking events in Syria is essential in order to be able to assess the drift of al-Sharaa's political regime, the possible emergence of a new

29 Naciones Unidas (27/02/2026). Security Council ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Removes One Entry from Its Sanctions List. Retrieved on 21/05/2026: <https://press.un.org/en/2026/sc16306.doc.htm>

scenario in which terrorist training camps might be established, or whether, on the contrary, the threat diminishes and syrian state reconstruction consolidates.

Finally, all of the above makes it necessary for the western response to be not merely one of waiting and observation, but rather one of active and systematic surveillance of jihadist terrorist activity that may develop in Syria, taking into account the following considerations:

- The level of stability that Syria may be able to achieve and the resulting political architecture. Depending on the type of government and the degree of inclusion of the country's various ethnic and religious groups, the potential for instability generated will have a direct impact on the security of the region, constituting an opportunity for groups such as DAESH to seek to establish or consolidate their presence.
- The emergence of an islamist-oriented government would represent a security problem not only at a regional but also at a global level. The tension in the Middle East, already heightened by the palestinian conflict and Israel's military operations against Hezbollah and in southern Syria, could be exacerbated, with a consequent increase in the risk of attacks in the West.
- In the worst-case scenario, the establishment of an openly jihadist political regime, as occurred in the areas controlled by DAESH in Syria and Iraq, could reproduce dynamics analogous to those of the 2014–2019 period, with consequences of greater scope than those described in the preceding points.

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