

Syria's Uncertain Future: The Rise of Extremist Groups in a Fragmented State

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Introduction

As Syria enters a new chapter following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in late 2024, the country faces a dangerous resurgence of extremist groups seeking to exploit its instability. The collapse of centralized authority has created a power vacuum, allowing jihadist organizations—most notably the Islamic State (IS)—to regroup and expand their influence. With weak state control, ungoverned spaces, and lingering sectarian tensions, Syria has once again become a breeding ground for extremist activities.



Source: Maclean's Magazine

In many parts of the country, local militias, remnants of IS, and other radical factions are taking advantage of the political uncertainty. These groups are not only launching attacks against security forces but are also trying to reassert their hold over key territories. The resurgence of violent extremism threatens both Syria's internal security and regional stability, as neighboring countries

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like Iraq and Jordan brace for cross-border threats. Despite efforts from the new government and regional players to counteract this rise, extremist networks continue to spread their influence, recruiting from displaced populations and exploiting economic hardships.

The rise of extremist groups in Syria shows us the dangers of prolonged instability in a war-torn nation. Without a coordinated strategy to dismantle these networks, Syria risks plunging into yet another cycle of violence. As the new leadership struggles to establish control, the fight against extremism will determine whether Syria can move toward a stable future or remain a fragmented battleground for radical ideologies.

A Double-Edged Takeover: Stability or Extremism?

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS), a group with roots in al-Qaeda, rise to power has changed the dynamics of extremism in Syria in multiple ways.² On one hand, its military success against the Assad regime has eliminated some of the chaos that allowed fragmented jihadist groups to operate freely. By centralizing power, HTS has, to an extent, suppressed rival militant factions, preventing a complete power vacuum. However, the transition from an insurgent group to a government has not erased its extremist roots. Reports indicate that despite efforts to project a more moderate image, HTS still enforces strict Sharia-based governance, suppresses dissent, and maintains a history of human rights violations.³ This shift in power has also influenced the behavior of other extremist groups. Some smaller jihadist factions, like Hurras al-Din⁴, have either aligned themselves with HTS in hopes of gaining influence within the new regime or have gone underground, preparing for a potential resurgence. The situation mirrors Afghanistan's Taliban

²CSIS. 2018. "Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) | Terrorism Backgrounders | CSIS." Wwww.csis.org. 2018. <https://www.csis.org/programs/former-programs/warfare-irregular-threats-and-terrorism-program-archives/terrorism-backgrounders/hayat-tahrir>.

³Gohel, Sajjan M. 2024. "HTS and Women's Rights in Syria." Foreign Policy. December 19, 2024. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/12/19/hts-syria-womens-rights-taliban-terrorism/>.

⁴"Huras Al-Din: The Overlooked Al-Qaeda Group in Syria." 2019. The Washington Institute. 2019. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/huras-al-din-overlooked-al-qaeda-group-syria>.

takeover, where extremist governance did not eliminate radical ideology but rather embedded it within state structures.

HTS is actively seeking international recognition, calling for the removal of its terrorist designation by the UN and the US. The group's leader, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani (Ahmed al-Sharaa), has promised a government based on institutions and inclusivity.⁵ However, skepticism remains high among the global community. While HTS may have taken steps to appear more politically mature, its extremist ideology and track record cannot be ignored. The greatest challenge for the international community is whether to engage with HTS as a governing authority or to treat it as an evolving extremist threat. If HTS is legitimized without concrete proof of ideological reform, it could set a dangerous precedent, encouraging other militant groups to seize power through violence and expect international acceptance. Additionally, international support for Syria under HTS could indirectly empower the organization, providing it with resources that might later be used to suppress opposition or expand its influence beyond Syria's borders.

At the same time, isolating HTS completely could worsen the humanitarian crisis, as sanctions and lack of foreign aid would continue to cripple Syria's already devastated economy. This delicate balance raises critical questions: should the global community prioritize stability over concerns of extremism? Or would supporting HTS indirectly validate terrorist governance?

If HTS genuinely shifts away from its extremist roots and builds an inclusive government, it could transform Syria into a relatively stable state, though under the shadow of a violent past. However, if HTS fails to separate itself from its terrorist ideology, the country risks descending into a new phase of radical rule, potentially inspiring other extremist movements worldwide. The UN's insistence on an inclusive political transition as a condition for economic support places pressure on HTS to prove its legitimacy. However, history has shown that groups born from extremism often struggle to change at their core. The coming months will reveal whether HTS is truly committed to governance or if its rule will become a new chapter in Syria's ongoing battle with

⁵Bowen, Jeremy. 2024. "Syria Not a Threat to World, HTS Leader Ahmed Al-Sharaa Tells BBC." *BBC*, December 18, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c05p9g2nqmeo>.

extremism. Until then, the world watches cautiously, knowing that the fate of Syria could set a precedent for the future of extremist-led states.

IS Exploits Syria's Power Vacuum



Source: The Washington Post

The Islamic State (IS) is making a dangerous comeback in Syria by taking advantage of the country's ongoing instability.⁶ Following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, the new government under Ahmed al-Sharaa is struggling to establish control over the entire nation. With security forces stretched thin and many regions left ungoverned, IS has found new opportunities to regroup and expand. The group has launched a series of attacks across Syria, demonstrating not just an increase in numbers but also improved tactics and coordination. Fighters from different parts of the world, including the Caucasus, Balkans, and Central Asia, are joining IS ranks, seeking to continue their

⁶Clarke, Colin P. 2025. "The Islamic State's Comeback in Syria, Worldwide." Foreign Policy. February 17, 2025. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/02/17/islamic-state-syria-comeback-terrorism/>.

jihad.⁷ Meanwhile, with tensions rising between various armed factions, including Kurdish forces and Turkish-backed militias, IS has managed to exploit these conflicts to further its own objectives.⁸

A major concern is the growing threat posed by IS fighters held in detention camps across northeastern Syria. These camps, guarded by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), are under increasing pressure due to clashes between the SDF and Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA).⁹ The lack of resources and funding for these camps has made security even weaker. A mass prison break, like the one IS carried out in 2022 in Hasakah¹⁰, could release thousands of extremists back into the battlefield, fueling a new wave of terror. The group has long used jailbreaks as a key strategy to rebuild its ranks, and with the current fragile situation, such an event could deal a major blow to Syria's security. If IS continues to expand unchecked, it could once again establish strongholds in the region, posing a serious threat not only to Syria but also to the broader Middle East and beyond.

Al-Qaeda's Remnants and the Threat of Extremist Expansion

Apart from IS, several other jihadist factions are also attempting to expand their influence. The remnants of Al-Qaeda-linked groups, such as Hurras al-Din, are seeking to establish control in strategic regions. Meanwhile, foreign fighters are returning to Syria, hoping to exploit the lack of a strong governing authority. The resurgence of these groups poses a serious threat not only to

⁷Ćwiek-Karpowicz, Jarosław, Gawlikowska-Fyk Aleksandra, Gradziuk Artur, Kałan Dariusz, Kościński Piotr, Płóciennik Sebastian, Sasnal Patrycja, et al. 2015. "Ready to Go? ISIS and Its Presumed Expansion into Central Asia," no. 19. [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/192428/PISM%20Policy%20Paper%20no%2019%20\(121\).pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/192428/PISM%20Policy%20Paper%20no%2019%20(121).pdf).

⁸Gol, Jiyar. 2025. "'We Are Still at War': Syria's Kurds Battle Turkey Months after Assad's Fall," February 26, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4g0w0x28yxo>.

⁹Schaer, Cathrin. 2024. "Fighting in Syrian Kurdish-Held Areas: What You Need to Know." Dw.com. Deutsche Welle. December 13, 2024. <https://www.dw.com/en/fighting-in-syrias-kurdish-held-areas-what-you-need-to-know/a-71051390>.

¹⁰"Regarding the Situation in Hasakah, Syria." 2022. Operation Inherent Resolve. January 30, 2022. <https://www.inherentresolve.mil/NEWSROOM/News-Articles/Stories-Display/Article/2917023/regarding-the-situation-in-hasakah-syria/>.

Syria but also to the broader region. Countries like Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey are particularly vulnerable, as cross-border terrorist activities could destabilize their security environments. Furthermore, there is a real concern that Syria could once again become a hub for global terrorism, with jihadist groups using the country as a base to launch attacks abroad. The international community must act swiftly to contain this resurgence before Syria descends into another cycle of extremist violence.

Way Forward: Risk of a New Jihadist Wave?

Looking ahead to 2025, the terrorism landscape in Syria is likely to become even more complex, with new extremist factions emerging and existing ones consolidating power. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), despite its efforts to present itself as a legitimate governing authority, still has deep-rooted jihadist ideologies. While HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani has made statements emphasizing governance and minority rights, many experts believe this is merely a strategic move to gain international legitimacy. If the UN and other global powers do not recognize HTS's rule, the group could revert to more hardline positions, potentially triggering another wave of extremism in Syria. Furthermore, there is a possibility of splinter groups breaking away from HTS, especially if hardliners within the organization reject its attempts at political engagement.



Source: Crisis Group

Beyond HTS and IS, the presence of Iranian-backed militias in Syria also complicates the situation. Groups such as Hezbollah and various pro-Iranian Shia militias could escalate sectarian tensions, further fueling radicalization among Sunni communities. Additionally, foreign fighters who once

flocked to Syria to fight against Assad may now return, contributing to the fragmentation of the militant landscape. With different factions competing for power, Syria could become a battleground for a new generation of jihadist movements. This situation presents a major challenge for regional and global security, as ungoverned spaces in Syria could serve as operational bases for international terrorist networks.

If left unaddressed, the proliferation of extremist groups in Syria could lead to a renewed era of terrorism, mirroring the chaos of the early 2010s. The international community must adopt a proactive approach, combining counterterrorism efforts with political and economic strategies to prevent Syria from becoming a breeding ground for future global terrorist threats.