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Jihadism in the Middle East: From hierarchical territorial control to dispersed local insurgency

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Abstract
This brief argues that the main jihadi movements in the Middle East have experienced three interconnected and transformative crises since the collapse of Islamic State's territorial control in 2019: a crisis of authority; a crisis of ideology; and a crisis of cohesion. These crises stem primarily from the decline of the central leadership and organisational capacity of al-Qaeda and Islamic State in the Middle East due to the Syrian Kurdish People's Defense Units (with US support), Iraq's Hashd al-Sha'abi (with Iranian and US support) and Global Coalition efforts against Islamic State. Peer networks of violent jihadi groups remain active across the wider Sahel–Horn–Middle East–Afghanistan-Pakistan region, even though their structure has evolved. With al-Qaeda and Islamic State having lost much of their capacity to hierarchically direct and control affiliates across the Middle East, new spaces have opened. The result is a more networked and horizontally connected jihadist landscape rather than one dominated by strong central command. The erosion of central authority has also given jihadists more doctrinal flexibility in relation to local context. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham is a key example of pragmatic adjustment. Today, jihadism in the Middle East is characterised by ideologies and practices that are more localised, pragmatic and fluid than in the pre-2019 period. Increasingly it is bottom-up and more networked than it is territorial. A key implication for policymakers is that countering such configurations requires tailored and locally anchored responses.

Introduction

Between 2001 and 2019, jihadism was a transnational ideological movement dominated by al-Qaeda (AQ) and, later, Islamic State (IS), with a mostly Arab leadership and based in the wider Middle East, including Afghanistan. In this period, jihadism generally featured strong centralised authority underpinned by a relatively universal and coherent narrative, a centralised communication strategy and a high degree of operational cohesion across theatres. With regards to authority, jihadists around the globe recognised AQ or IS leadership. In terms of ideological coherence, jihadists adhered to a core set of principles despite doctrinal differences between AQ and IS – namely: that the West wages a war against Islam; that jihad is an individual and enduring duty to defend the Islamic community (*Umma*) until Islam's global victory is achieved; that no compromise is possible with non-Muslim communities and states; that Sunni leaders who fail to uphold their faith should no longer be regarded as true believers; that they, as well as infidels (including Shi'a), must be fought;[1] and that the ultimate jihadi goal is the establishment of a Caliphate across all Muslim lands.[2] Operationally, attacks were often planned at senior levels in Iraq, Syria or Yemen and executed by followers acting under orders.

The failure of Islamic State's extraordinary territorial project in Iraq and Syria triggered a transformative crisis that affected three core pillars of the jihadist movement in the Middle East – *authority, ideology and cohesion* – with ripple effects felt globally. From the perspective of authority, the proclamation of the Caliphate in Syria and Iraq elevated IS to a position of global leadership as it came to embody the mainstream jihadist movement. Today, IS leadership is under significant strain, with three self-proclaimed Caliphs having been killed since al-Baghdadi.[3] Al-Qaeda, IS's main leadership rival, followed a similar – though less dramatic – trajectory in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen – even though it still retains some operational capability in Yemen.[4] Overall, the gravitational centres of jihadist movements have shifted away from the Middle East and towards the Sahel, Horn of Africa and Central Asia/Afghanistan, leaving a power vacuum in its historical centre – the Middle East.

Ideologically, former local jihadi groups, especially Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), have broken away from strict adherence to teachings that used to be handed top-down, adapting their ideology and operations to local interests, at least up to a point. More groups might follow such a path. Operationally, recruitment is conducted by local groups rather than by central leadership. For example, Islamic State–Khorasan (IS-K), based in Pakistan and Afghanistan, is now the IS branch that has proved most capable of conducting large-scale attacks abroad – particularly across the former Soviet space.[5] It also seems to lead recruitment of individuals from Western Muslim communities for violent activities.[6]

Against this backdrop, the paper examines how and why three transformative crises have reshaped jihadism in the Middle East. It investigates how these crises have given rise to new jihadist formations and strategies, and what this evolution means for those designing and implementing counter-terrorism policies. The analysis draws on interviews with ten experts on jihadism and Syria as well as extensive desk research. The paper also floats critical questions for further research: Is the crisis of jihadism in the Middle East changing the nature of IS and al-Qaeda? Is their leadership evolving from providing doctrinal guidance, organisational support and resources to more diffuse brand inspiration and symbolism for a new generation of leaders and followers?

To address these questions, the paper examines jihadism's crises of authority, ideology and cohesion in the Middle East, and the effects they are having. It uses a case study of HTS to zoom in on the ideological crisis, and it explains how a mix of declining central authority along with operational necessity led the group to chart a new approach. The brief's conclusion discusses the implications of these crises – and the shifts they caused – in relation to counter-radicalisation strategies.

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[1] Jihadist groups employ the concept of *takfīr* – loosely translated as excommunication, which refers to the idea that a "true" Muslim can declare those who do not adhere to the tenets of Islam to be outside the faith and legitimately fight against them.

[2] Hegghammer, T. The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Cfr. Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2015); Matteo Colombo & Luigi Curini, *Discussing the Islamic State on Twitter* (Springer Nature, 2022).

[3] Islamic State confirms death of its leader, names replacement, Voice of America, 3 August 2023.

[4] Fernando Carvajal, "How al-Qaeda is losing control in southern Yemen," *The New Arab*, 21 November 2022.

[5] Tech Against Terrorism, "Moscow Attack Requires Renewed and Coordinated Focus on Islamic State–Khorasan," Tech Against Terrorism, 22 March 2024.

[6] Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "Analysis: From Afghanistan to America: The Rising Reach of the Islamic State's Khorasan Province," *FDD's Long War Journal*, 3 February 2025.

The authority crisis: Less centralised leadership and back to peer networks

Between the reconquest of Mosul from IS in Iraq (2017) and the fall of the last IS stronghold of Baghouz, Syria (2019), the organisational cores of IS and al-Qaeda entered a phase of decline that is permanent in the territorial sense but temporary from a network perspective. This 2017–2019 period marked the end of the second phase of jihadi history (2001– 2019), which was characterised by highly centralised jihadist authority – first under the leadership of al-Qaeda by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, and later under the Islamic State's self-declared Caliphate. The current and third phase (2019–ongoing) represents a partial return to the first phase of jihadism in the Middle East (1980s–2001), which was characterised by locally diverse, insurgent-style organisations embedded in horizontally-structured transnational networks. Yet the political, economic and technological context of the present third phase is different from the first. Presently, both organisations continue to exist across the region, particularly in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, but the combined effects of leadership attrition, sustained counter-terrorism pressure and the loss of territorial sanctuaries significantly reduced their hierarchical authority and operational coherence.

Moreover, both groups face significant obstacles in attempting to recapture their former prominence due to an exceptionally dense and sustained counter-terrorism environment in the Middle East. Since 2014, Syria and Iraq have served as the primary theatres for global military campaigns against IS and al-Qaeda, involving prolonged operations by local forces, international coalitions and regional actors. In parallel, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have intensified domestic crackdowns on jihadist networks, financing and mobilisation. This sustained military and intelligence pressure sets the Middle East apart from other regions. It has likely accelerated the erosion of centralised jihadist authority.

After 2017–2019, the operational footprint of Islamic State shrunk dramatically. In Iraq, for example, IS-linked attacks dropped from 210 between March and August 2021 to only 9 over the same period in 2025.[7] In Syria, Islamic State is also in decline, even though its descent is more gradual. Potential for some sort of revival remains. Despite continuing asymmetric hit-and-run attacks, IS retains operational capabilities but regenerates at a slower pace than it declines. For example, the number of recorded IS attacks in the areas held by the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) in Syria until January 2026 declined from 344[8] in 2021 to 196 by October 2025.[9] Moreover, since the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019, Islamic State has appointed four successive caliphs within a five-year period, of whom three were killed.[10] They were unable to establish central direction or steer organisational adaptation, leaving the group weakened. The unprecedented conquest of territory by IS that culminated in its Caliphate generated significant levels of authority and recruitment. However, once that territory and its governing structures were lost, the organisation was left with only a residual claim to leadership and limited capacity to reassert control. Today, most IS activities in the Middle East "consist of small-scale ambushes and hit-and-run operations, but it faces overwhelming military pressure and lacks recruitment momentum".[11]

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[7] Based on ACLED data expanded and analysed by Clingendael from September 2020 until August 2025.

[8] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "ISIS resurgence in the Syrian desert: Nearly 900 fatalities in 2021," SOHR, 14 January 2022.

[9] Welat TV, "ISIS seeks to re-establish control in the Syrian desert (Badia)," Welat TV, 14 October 2025.

[10] Islamic State confirms death of its leader, names replacement, Voice of America, 3 August 2023.

[11] Interview with Wassim Nasr, senior research fellow at The Soufan Center, 16 September 2025.

Figure 1: Jihadist groups in the Middle East

Group	Ideological alignment	Primary area of activity (2025)	Key assessment
Islamic State in Iraq and Syria	Islamic State	Iraq, Syria	Decentralised and weakening insurgent network; no territorial control
Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)	al-Qaeda aligned	Yemen	AQ affiliate; sustained operational activity; no territorial control
Ansar al-Sharia	al-Qaeda aligned	Yemen	AQAP sub-network with local branding
Hurras al-Din	al-Qaeda aligned	Northwestern Syria (Idlib)	Small, hardline AQ affiliate; degraded and as good as fully dissolved
Jaysh al-Ummah	al-Qaeda leaning	Gaza Strip	Marginal group; hostile to Hamas

The central leadership of al-Qaeda has similarly failed to develop successful strategies to regain influence in the region. Following the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2022, the group refrained from naming a formal successor or reasserting territorial control in the Middle East. Al Qaeda in Yemen (AQAP), for instance, continues to conduct dozens of attacks annually but is no longer able to control or administer the territory it had in 2016.[12] As one expert noted, its organisational capacity to conduct large operations appears "limited and ineffectual".[13] The group's current de-facto leader, Saif al-Adel – believed to be based in Iran – has reportedly assumed a guiding role within the network but lacks the name recognition, public profile and charismatic authority of Osama bin Laden or Ayman al-Zawahiri. While this may be a conscious decision to avoid targeted strikes, it has also diminished al-Qaeda's leading global profile beyond jihadi networks and groups already dedicated to it.[14] Overall, the organisation's senior leadership appears to have lost much of its authority, appeal and credibility. Initially, this was due to the rise of Islamic State, and subsequently through the prolonged absence and inactivity of its leader.[15]

As a result, al-Qaeda leadership is weakened among Middle Eastern militant groups. This is evident in cases such as the crackdown on Hurras al-Din, an al-Qaeda-aligned Syrian faction, by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).[16] Following HTS's decision to distance itself from al-Qaeda, Hurras al-Din has been significantly weakened and was ultimately dissolved in January 2025. What remained of al-Qaeda's central leadership was unable to turn the tide.

Remaining IS and AQ affiliates in the Middle East now operate more autonomously and on a localised basis. That said, as one expert noted, some groups remain "formally affiliated, but are outside the control of central leadership", highlighting that hierarchy across the jihadist universe has declined.[17] Local groups remain inspired by shared ideological building blocks but pursue (sub-)national goals.[18] On a practical level, we see a localisation of jihad: a shift from the transnational project of global conquest to locally embedded insurgencies.[19] It is no surprise that HTS has taken the lead in prioritising local agendas and realities over global jihadi doctrine, forging pragmatic alliances with other armed actors and avoiding high-profile international attacks that risk provoking foreign intervention.

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[12] Fernando Carvajal, "How al-Qaeda is losing control in southern Yemen," *The New Arab*, 21 November 2022.

[13] Interview with Colin Clarke, Executive Director of The Soufan Center, 18 August 2025.

[14] Ryan Zoellner, "Profile: Saif al Adel of al Qaeda," *Wilson Center*, 27 March 2023.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] The New Arab, "al-Qaeda's Syria wing dissolves after HTS crackdown", 29 January 2025.

[17] Interview with Daniele Garofalo, Analyst and Researcher, 21 October 2025.

[18] Cfr. Barak Mendelsohn, "On the Horizon: The Future of the Jihadi Movement," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, March 2024 and "From Global Jihad to Local Insurgencies: the Changing Nature of Sub-Saharan Jihadism," *DefenceWeb / International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)*, February 2024.

Arguably, this suggests that, in the Middle East, the main security threat has shifted from centrally directed, large-scale campaigns of violence to the slow resurgence of what are now marginal local insurgencies. This points to the importance of state-building and local resilience-enhancing efforts, such as in parts of Syria and Iraq, where governance deficits risk enabling jihadist resurgence. As another expert warned, "what we face now are local insurgencies that govern from below."[20] In this context, targeting centralised leadership matters far less than it once did. What is now decisive are the political and governance conditions that enable local insurgencies to take root, embed themselves within communities and gradually expand. Each theatre presents distinct dynamics, requiring tailored, context-specific policy responses rather than a one-size-fits-all counter-terrorism approach, as discussed in the conclusion.

The ideological crisis – viewed through the lens of HTS

In addition to the crisis of authority, jihadi movements in the Middle East are also confronting an ideological crisis, a dynamic well illustrated by the trajectory of HTS. When the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) released a video entitled "The End of Sykes-Picot" on 29 June 2014, it celebrated its crossing of the Syrian border, portraying the act as a symbolic demolition of the foreign-imposed state system of the Middle East and the dawn of a new Caliphate.[21] In stark contrast, on 23 September 2025 Syria's acting president, Ahmed al-Sharaa – once a member of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) during its al-Qaeda-aligned phase – stood on the podium at the UN General Assembly in New York and proclaimed his desire to rebuild the Syrian state for all its people with due respect for the security of its neighbours, stating that "Syria is reclaiming its rightful place among the nations of the world."[22]

Later that day, he even shared a stage with General David Petraeus, the very same US commander who oversaw his detention in Camp Bucca.[23] This juxtaposition crystallises the startling trajectory of both a former jihadist leader and HTS as a jihadi group: a transformation from wreaking extremist violence to wielding internationally legitimated political authority and joining the global state system instead of seeking to overthrow it. This shift also manifests how the decline in central jihadi doctrinal authority in the Middle East enabled HTS to reinterpret jihadism as a vehicle for developing political legitimacy and engaging in state-building rather than maintaining perpetual war. Learning from past failures, jihadists in Syria gradually recognised that a rigid Salafi-jihadi framework had become counterproductive in the pluralistic context in which they operate. One in four Syrians do not fit the Sunni Arab profile of HTS.[24] As Jérôme Drevon observed, they began asking themselves whether it was worth "continuing to believe in an idea that populations do not embrace and which generates strong international hostility”.[25]

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[19] Cfr. Jerôme Drevon & Patrick Haenni, "How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads: The Case of HTS, the Former AQ Franchise in Syria," Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies Research Paper 2021/08, 2021 and Raphael Lefèvre, "Why jihad goes local: mechanisms behind the transnational spread of militant ideologies," in Borders of Conflict: Navigating Policy in a Transnational Ecosystem (Global Policy, 2024).

[20] Interview with Edmund Fitton-Brown, Senior Fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies; and former Coordinator of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring team, 23 July 2025.

[21] Chulov, Martin. "ISIS Tightens Grip on Iraq and Syria as It Declares New Islamic State." *The Guardian*, 29 June 2014.

[22] Al Jazeera, "In his first UN speech, Syria's al-Sharaa urges end to all sanctions," *Al Jazeera*, 24 September 2025.

[23] Humeyra Pamuk, "Syria's Sharaa, in New York, renews call for US to formally drop sanctions," *Reuters*, 22 September 2025.

[24] Central Intelligence Agency. ''*Syria. In The World Factbook*''. 2024.

The transformation of HTS is, therefore, the result of a decade-long process of political adaptation and doctrinal relaxation from mainstream leadership and ideological constraints that started before the territorial defeat of IS.[26] The change is not only a tactical shift but is rooted in a more intellectual endeavour shaped by ongoing events. Moreover, it represents a strategic adaptation to Syria’s plural and fragmented environment, in which effective governance requires negotiation and restraint. As Silvia Carenzi observes, “it also indicates political maturation, since armed group identities and ideological features do not exist in isolation but are interconnected with developments on the ground and local socio-political milieux.”[27] Colin Clarke also notes that the shift was not cosmetic, as “HTS chose to govern locally rather than chase the global jihadist dream.”[28]

Initially, the ideological change was not triggered by internal discussion but was an adaptation to ongoing events. In July 2016, Ahmed al-Sharaa – then known by his nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Golani – announced the group’s “independence” from al-Qaeda and rebranded Jabhat al-Nusra as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, which later evolved into HTS.[29] This move signalled a deliberate departure from the global jihadist branding, marked by the cessation of attacks outside Syria and greater focus on local governance. Soon after, HTS even began clamping down on or marginalising those components perceived as al-Qaeda loyalists within its Idlib stronghold.[30] Its decision was rooted in the idea that affiliation with global jihadist networks became a liability to the group rather than an asset because it attracts international attacks and tarnishes its reputation, making cooperation with other states much more complex. More broadly, HTS’s decision suggests that renouncing transnational jihadi ambitions and engaging with the international system based on a local position of strength can serve as a strategy to gain power and relevance and engage the international system without triggering global military intervention. Today, such evolution has reached a point in which interim President of the Syrian Republic – al-Sharaa – has joined the international anti-IS coalition.[31]

Once it had distanced itself from the operational and ideological constraints of IS and al-Qaeda’s leadership, HTS could gradually reconceptualise its religious and political stance. While formally aligning itself with the tradition of *siyāsa sharʿiyya* (Islamic law-guided public policy), commonly associated with strands of modern Salafism,[32] the group promoted a more pragmatic understanding of Islamic law. Its view maintains that Islamic law rests on immutable principles (*thawābit*) that remain valid across time and space, but it also recognises that such principles cannot be applied mechanically. On the contrary, they must be interpreted considering the higher objectives of the law (*maqāṣid al-sharīʿa*) and the public good (*maṣlaḥa*). Rooted in classical Sunni jurisprudence, *siyāsa sharʿiyya* grants rulers discretionary authority to act in the public interest in areas where scriptural sources are silent. *Maqāṣid*-based reasoning, in turn, emphasises the preservation of religion, life and social order as overarching aims of the law. Together, these interpretive tools enable the prioritisation of objectives according to changing circumstances. The concept of jihad illustrates this logic. Although jihad is commonly framed – by jihadist movements as well as by HTS – as a moral obligation incumbent upon Muslims, its application is treated by this group as conditional. As one of the group's ideologues, Abd al-Rahīm Atoun (Abu Abd al-Hāshimī), argues, *jihad* has constants and variables.[33] By means of this clarification – or ambiguity – jihad can be viewed as a tactical means to mobilise followers to capture national power rather than as an incumbent religious and militant duty.

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[25] Interview with Drevon, Senior Analyst on Jihad and Modern Conflict at International Crisis Group,14 July 2025.

[26] Jérôme Drevon and Patrick Haeni 2025. *Transformed by the people: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s road to power in Syria*. C. London: Hurst & Co.

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] Interview with Colin Clarke, Executive Director of The Soufan Center, 18 August 2025.

[29] Martin Chulov, “ Al-Nusra Front cuts ties with al-Qaida and renames itself”, *The Guardian*, 28 July 2016.

[30] Interview with Silvia Carenzi, ISPI Associate Research Fellow, 28 May 2025.

[31] Associated Press. *Syrian official says his country is joining the anti-IS coalition.*
November 10, 2025,

[32] Jérôme Drevon 2024. *From Jihad to Politics: How Syrian Jihadis Embraced Politics*. London: Hurst & Co.

This new political-religious framing introduces a significant degree of discretion into decisions regarding its implementation. Taken together, these doctrines provide a theological justification for flexible, interest-based governance, marking a departure from the rigid, text-centred framework that characterised earlier mainstream Salafi-jihadi doctrine.[34] By emphasising the overarching purposes of Sharia and context-sensitive political judgement, HTS was also able to present itself as capable of accommodating a broader range of local actors and social needs rather than just imposing a top-down approach to governance. For example, its departure from the mainstream jihadist concept of *al-Wala' wa-l-Bara'* ("loyalty and disavowal") – which prescribes loyalty to "true" Muslims and dissociation from those considered apostates – allowed for alliances with groups deemed *murtaddin* (apostates) by IS and al-Qaeda because of their secular or nationalist orientation.[35] This framework has even reinforced cooperation with external actors like Turkey and, more recently, Western powers.

Another political advantage of this more pragmatic governance model is that it has allowed the group to take a more inclusive approach towards traditional local clerics outside of jihadist circles,[36] which has helped cement its local support base. Moreover, it opened the door to soften its treatment of religious and ethnic minorities in northwestern Syria. To be clear, traces of strict sectarian attitudes persist among parts of HTS leadership and among followers, as partially evidenced by recent spates of violence against Syria's Alawites[37] and Druze[38] in the spring and autumn of 2025. Overall, however, the movement has notably toned down its exclusionary rhetoric. In Idlib, it has allowed Christian and Druze communities to remain in their villages under negotiated arrangements, which is a remarkable departure from the earlier logic of expulsion or extermination that characterised Islamic State rule.[39] A telling episode from 2020 illustrates this shift. When a Druze leader from Idlib insisted that his community had converted to Islam, al-Sharaa reportedly replied, "there is no compulsion in religion", declaring conversion unnecessary.[40] This marks a very different approach from the violent approach towards minorities of jihadist groups.

Therefore, what began as a strategic break and tactical distancing from al-Qaeda (2016) gradually evolved into a redefinition of strategic identity by important segments of HTS, which remain ascendant. At the same time, HTS still contains different factions, including both hardline and more pragmatic elements. At present, the latter appear to dominate the movement's leadership, and recent developments suggest little immediate prospect of this balance shifting. Against this background, while HTS's leadership continues, in principle, to uphold Salafi-jihadist beliefs (*aqida*), these doctrines carry little political weight in its day-to-day governance. As Dino Krause adds, HTS's priorities have become "bureaucratic and power maximising rather than militant and revolutionary".[41] This transformation in its internal and external ideological posturing marks an historical turning point: "For the first time, with al-Sharaa we see that there is a way out of global jihadism and international terrorism as we know it."[42] Drevon summarises it succinctly: "They [*HTS*] remain Islamists, but they are no longer jihadi, because they don't believe in the premises of jihadism."[43] His words frame the broader significance of HTS's trajectory – not simply as a tactical shift, but as evidence that even within the doctrinal strictures and "true belief" of jihadism, evolution and recalibration are possible. As Clarke suggests, "many are watching Syria – some with admiration, others with resentment – to see whether this alternative path from jihad to governance can hold."[44] In the most recent edition of its publication *An-Naba*, Islamic State for example denounces al-Sharaa as an apostate and rejects HTS's engagement with both the West and democracy. It also calls on disillusioned HTS members to return to IS.[45]

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[33] Interview with Silvia Carenzi, ISPI Associate Research Fellow, 28 May 2025.

[34] Jérôme Drevon 2024. *From Jihad to Politics: How Syrian Jihadis Embraced Politics*. London: Hurst & Co.

[35] Karin Göldner-Ebenthal and Ahmed Elsayed, *Salafi jihadi armed groups and conflict (de-)escalation: The case of Ahrar al-Sham in Syria*. Case Study Report, Berghof Foundation, 2019.

[36] Jerôme Drevon and Patrick Haenni, "The end of Jihadi Salafism? The religious governance of HTS, the Post-Jihadi rebel ruler in Northern Syria," Mediterranean Politics, 9 May 2025. Jérôme Drevon and Patrick Haeni 2025. *Transformed by the people: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's road to power in Syria*. C. Hurst & Co. and Mackenzie Holtz, "Examining Extremism: Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS)," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Transnational Threats Program blog, 3 August 2023.

[37] Maggie Michael, "Syrian forces massacred 1,500 Alawites. The chain of command led to Damascus," *Reuters*, 30 June 2025.

[38] United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "Syria: UN experts alarmed by attacks on Druze communities, including sexual violence," *OHCHR*, 21 August 2025

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] Faiz Dugheim, "الجولاني-حامي-الأقليات-يتلقى-رسائل-بالدم", *Syria TV*, 21 August 2022.

HTS is, therefore, both a contributing factor and a product of the crisis of jihadism, as well as an example of a more viable pathway for (ultra-) conservative Islamic thought and practice to exercise influence. Situated between the co-optation of some Islamist groups by authoritarian rulers and strict global jihadi principles, it remains to be seen whether HTS success is durable and replicable elsewhere. On the one hand, the group's ideological DNA cannot be transmuted so easily: HTS still includes figures who hold hardcore sectarian convictions and arguably remain intent on consolidating a (semi-) authoritarian, ultra-conservative form of rule. On the other hand, HTS increasingly bases its legitimacy on its ability to reconstruct Syria, deliver public services, manage relations with foreign powers, and navigate the complexities of a pluralistic society through pragmatic rather than purely ideological means.

Moreover, beyond the implications for developing new models of successful Islamist rule, the HTS trajectory illustrates more broadly how the adaptation of a rigid ideological core can create space for a local jihadist group to pursue a more autonomous path. As shown above, by redefining jihad as contingent, interest-based and subordinate to political authority, and by anchoring governance in concepts such as *siyāsa sharʿiyya* and the *maqāṣid al-sharīʿa*, HTS moved beyond fixed doctrinal precepts and engaged a broader range of religious, social and political authorities. This shift enabled the group to act on political calculations rather than ideological imperatives, such as refraining from attacks abroad that would invite international countermeasures. Moreover, this shift of approach has enabled HTS to forge more durable ties with local populations and non-jihadist elites, enhancing its resilience and governing capacity. In this sense, HTS has become a potential reference point for other jihadist groups operating in similarly pluralistic and strategically constrained environments by demonstrating a pathway through which greater internal autonomy and a measure of international legitimacy can be pursued.[46]

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[41] Interview with Dino Krause, independent researcher, 30 June 2025.

[42] Interview with Wassim Nasr, senior research fellow at The Soufan Center, 16 September 2025.

[43] Interview with Jerôme Drevon, Senior Analyst for Syria and Islamist Movements at the International Crisis Group, 14 July 2025.

[44] Interview with Colin Clarke, Executive Director of The Soufan Center, 18 August 2025.

[45] SpecialEurasia, "Al-Naba 495: Islamic State's Propaganda Against al-Sharaa and the Syrian-Israeli Normalisation Tracks," 18 May 2025.

[46] Jérôme Drevon 2024. *From Jihad to Politics: How Syrian Jihadis Embraced Politics*. London: Hurst & Co.

The crisis of cohesion: Community, platforms and fragmented propaganda

The decline of Islamic State and al-Qaeda has substantially diluted their centralised messaging in the Middle East. In the region's new jihadi environment, radicalisation happens more often within small, self-reinforcing communities and is driven more by horizontal rather than vertical dynamics. It is increasingly organised transnationally on a networked basis, not by professional communication offices, embedded ideologues or charismatic fighters, but by ordinary users. Krause observes that the first phases of radicalisation now take place "almost entirely in the online space",[47] where encrypted platforms such as Telegram have become primary networks for sympathisers with information-sharing managed by users themselves rather than by official accounts of established groups. The decline of centralised propaganda has thus transformed the radicalisation experience for those living outside of jihadi-controlled areas into more of an online participatory process. It is now network-dependent rather than centre-dependent, interactive rather than broadcast, and sustained by community reproduction rather than organisational discipline. It privileges emotional resonance and identity and symbolic affirmation over sustained doctrinal or ideological engagement.

The decline of IS/AQ jihadist narratives in the Middle East is also visible in the fact that jihadi discourse on Gaza is somewhat fragmented and inconclusive. It blends familiar global ideological motifs – such as the Western attack against Islam – with local grievances. But for jihadist groups it has been difficult to fully capitalise on the conflict or weave a universal militant Islamic narrative around it. This is in part because Gaza's radicalisation potential is limited due to the inability to take direct action in Israel or the occupied territories, and because Palestinian nationalist aspirations deviate from the jihadist vision of a unified Muslim polity under the Caliphate. As a result, the war in Gaza mostly boosts local recruitment and local militancy elsewhere, in ways that have little relevance for events in Gaza.[48]

This overall shift marks the culmination of a longer process that, as Lucas Webber describes, has seen "unofficial pro-IS online networks"[49] evolve into "global, multilingual ecosystems"[50] generating decentralised peer-to-peer content, Do It Yourself (DIY) manuals, and guides for conducting attacks. As one expert explained, jihadist messaging today is "primarily local (...) small videos, small messages (...), increasingly in local languages to reach the population".[51] Similarly, Bergoglio Errico notes that recruitment has become "very local, almost cellular", tailored for individuals.[52] Users often do not delve deeply into ideology; they react to events and other immediate cues. Francesco Marone characterises this environment as one of "multi-message propaganda",[53] blending jihadist, conspiratorial and grievance-based narratives.

The result is a global ecosystem of peer-to-peer networks, in which horizontal propaganda, geographic variation in ideology and digital networks sustain localised jihadi militancy.[54] At the same time, some local jihadi groups now provide specific services – like outreach or financial support – to broader global networks in a kind of service provision role.

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[47] Interview with Dino Krause, independent researcher, 30 June 2025.

[48] International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, "The Jihadist Landscape Amidst Israel–Hamas War: Five Critical Factors," ICCT, 7 December 2023.

[49] Interview with Lucas Webber, Senior Research Fellow at The Soufan Center and Senior Threat Intelligence Analyst at Tech Against Terrorism, 16 July 2025.

[50] *Ibid.*

[51] Interview with Daniele Garofalo, Analyst and Researcher, 21 October 2025.

[52] Interview with Francesco Bergoglio Errico, Founder & Executive Director, Monitoring Jihadism Project, 18 June 2025.

[53] Interview with Francesco Marone, Associate Professor, University of Aosta Valley, 19 June 2025.

[54] Europol. 2025. *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2025*. The Hague.

This "ideological flexibility",[55] as Marone calls it, allows movements to recruit beyond traditional Salafi-jihadi milieux and adapt their discourse to shifting political contexts. It opens the door to the dissemination of strategies and operational practices between different militant radical milieux regardless of ideological position, ranging from nativist and neo-Nazi to jihadi Islamist groups.

Naturally, this evolution brings new counter-terrorism challenges. Efforts to counter online extremism have often prioritised takedowns of branded content. However, disrupting formal organisations, removing official propaganda outlets and designating identifiable groups has become less effective in environments where mobilisation occurs through diffuse peer-to-peer networks, informal influencers and cross-ideological digital communities. Moreover, decentralised ecosystems demonstrate a strong adaptive capacity: narratives circulate not only through official group channels but across distributed digital and social media networks that rapidly reproduce and adapt them across platforms and ideological boundaries. As a result, policy responses risk targeting the symptoms of organised jihadism rather than the broader networked milieux in which contemporary radicalisation is embedded. Addressing this shift requires moving beyond organisation-centric models towards strategies that engage with the social, digital and cross-ideological infrastructures sustaining horizontal militancy.[56]

Conclusions

Ultimately, the failure of leading jihadi groups to realise their utopian promise of the Caliphate has created a set of paradoxes in the contemporary geopolitical context of the Middle East: weaker jihadi organisations but a growing set of grievances; declining hierarchical leadership yet strong peer-to-peer transnational exchanges and networks; fewer coordinated attacks but a broader willingness to undertake local attacks; a lower global reach but stronger local dynamism; diminished global ambition but more adaptive local militancy. Currently, it is unlikely that the recent takeover on northeast Syria by forces linked to Damascus from the Syrian Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG) will enable a revival of Islamic State in the short-term. This is because Syria's Sunni tribes maintain positive relations with the Al-Sharaa government, Syria's government itself has joined the US in its fight against violent extremism, the Sunni population of western Iraq is both IS-weary and under high levels of surveillance, while only a few IS-fighters appear to have escaped during the transition.

Major questions nevertheless remain unresolved in understanding and addressing this new phase of jihadism. Such questions include how peer-to-peer jihadi networks operate within their current strongholds – such as the Sahel, Lake Chad, Somalia and the Afghanistan-Pakistan region – in terms of mutual support exchanges of operational practices and ongoing ideological adaptation. Equally important is understanding how increasingly localised recruitment – enabled by digital infrastructures and transnational online communities – may or may not contribute to a renewed globalisation and popularisation of jihadi activity over time, particularly in a context marked by the normalisation of protracted conflict and intensifying great-power competition that such groups are well-positioned to exploit.

Overall, the threat of jihadi violence in or stemming from the Middle East has substantially diminished and is no longer primarily the result of hierarchically structured organisations with a territorial base that orchestrate large-scale attacks in the region or across the globe. Rather, the current threat takes the form of indirect effects of local attacks that emerge from more fluid ecosystems. These systems merge local grievances with flexible global jihadi narratives through decentralised digital networks, including at times even surprising links between violent far right and jihadi networks. Based on the analysis outlined above, a few changes to counter-terrorism approaches in the Middle East region ought to be considered:

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[55] *Ibid.*

[56] Katz, Yaron. (2025). Social Movement Theory and Jihadist Mobilization. *European Academic Research*, XIII(6).

1. It is crucial to maintain counter-terrorism pressure, but its focus must be partially re-oriented from dismantling leadership structures and remnants of territorial control – like parts of the Badiya desert in Syria or the Hamrin mountains in Iraq – to disrupting decentralised recruitment and funding channels that are increasingly digital and networked.

2. Counter-terrorism policies must put greater emphasis on promoting local legitimacy and good-quality governance. Addressing local grievances, supporting accountable governance and engaging in locally tailored conflict mediation reduces the sociopolitical space available for jihadist groups to recover, redevelop and exploit grievances. It is also important to engage with movements that attempt to exit jihadi networks and practices by outlining conditional pathways to political normalisation.

3. Counter-terrorism agencies must develop greater digital expertise, coordination and technological tools – such as advanced analytics and AI – to keep pace with decentralised jihadist activity rather than relying solely on traditional surveillance and takedowns.[57] Effective counter-radicalisation strategies require targeted narrative interventions and digital literacy that can contest emotive triggers and symbolic appeals within these peer-to-peer environments rather than only removing surface content.

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[57] Winder, Sarah et al. 2025. Combatting New Forms of Extremism. CT-A4128-1. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

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