

Opinion – Recognizing Syria’s New Government Risks Middle East Stability

Written by Mohammad Javad Mousavizadeh

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MOHAMMAD JAVAD MOUSAVIZADEH, MAR 17 2025

On 8 December 2024, the streets of Damascus erupted in a mix of jubilation and uncertainty as Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a Sunni Islamist militia with roots as an al-Qaeda offshoot, toppled Bashar al-Assad’s regime after a stunning 11-day offensive. Overnight, Syria’s transitional government, led by HTS commander Ahmed al-Sharaa, emerged from the ashes of a decades-long dictatorship. Within days, Turkey reopened its embassy, Saudi Arabia offered a diplomatic relationship, and the U.S. lifted al-Sharaa’s \$10 million bounty after a meeting. By December 2024, Qatar and France recognized this authority, while Russia, Britain, and Iraq showed openness. Yet, this swift acceptance of an unelected, terrorist-rooted regime—akin to the Taliban’s 2021 takeover—undermines established norms. It sidelines democracy, excuses HTS’s violent past, and frays a rules-based order as states favor strategy over law.

The Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 and HTS’s rapid rise in Syria highlight a troubling trend: military control trumps democratic legitimacy and accountability. This pattern, driven by inconsistent global recognition standards, risks emboldening extremist factions—such as the Islamic State in Iraq, Al Qaeda in Yemen, and Lebanon’s Abdullah Azzam Brigades, Fatah al-Islam, Hurras al-Din, and Jund al-Sham—to pursue similar strategies, further destabilizing a region already scarred by sectarian conflict. The rise of HTS has shown that states prioritize strategic interests over legal values. Turkey, a long-time supporter of the Syrian opposition, acted swiftly: on December 12, 2024, intelligence chief Ibrahim Kalin visited Damascus, pledging support for stabilization efforts. Two days later, its embassy reopened, affirming prior ties. Saudi Arabia, countering Iran, followed: on January 24, 2025, Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan met al-Sharaa in Damascus; a week later, on February 2, al-Sharaa’s Riyadh visit—his first as leader—sealed a diplomatic win.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s warm welcome signaled Arab recognition. Qatar recognized the transitional government and dispatched a delegation to Damascus on December 12. France endorsed HTS through envoy Jean-François Guillaume’s mid-December talks. The U.S. opted for de facto engagement, lifting al-Sharaa’s bounty after a December meeting. On February 12, Russia’s Vladimir Putin held a constructive call with al-Sharaa, moving to delist HTS as a terrorist group. Iraq invited al-Sharaa to a May 2025 Arab Summit, and Egypt’s Abdel Fattah el-Sisi welcomed him to a March 4 Cairo summit, where he met Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and urged Israel’s withdrawal from southern Syria. The UN’s Geir Pedersen, meeting al-Sharaa in December, pushed for inclusivity under Resolution 2254.

The Taliban’s slower path to acceptance contrasts sharply. Since seizing Afghanistan in 2021, it has ruled without elections or a constitution, lacking de jure recognition by February 2025 despite ties with China, Russia, and Pakistan. Qatar, the UAE, and Turkey keep pragmatic links, while Saudi Arabia reopened its Kabul embassy in December 2024. The U.S., via Qatar and UN channels, prioritizes humanitarian needs over legitimacy. Its exclusionary rule—banning women’s education, sidelining minorities—defies norms, hindering broader acceptance.

HTS has gained quicker goodwill. Al-Sharaa’s inclusivity pledges, invitations to ex-Ba’athists like Farouk al-Sharaa, and prisoner releases suggest moderation. Unlike the Taliban’s gender apartheid, HTS avoids barring women from public life—though its stance is untested. Assad’s fall, marked by war crimes, casts HTS as a liberator. Yet, the

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world overlooks HTS’s dark past, swapping Assad’s autocracy for an unproven group.

The vulnerability of parts of Asia and the Middle East to terrorist groups seizing power raises concerns that this could become a repeatable strategy. The constitutive theory, tying legitimacy to recognition, falters as HTS gains de facto and formal backing. If brute force proves sufficient for recognition, groups like ISKP in Afghanistan or AQAP in Yemen may seek to replicate this model. Hurras al-Din in Idlib, Jaish al-Adl on Iran’s border, or the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan could exploit vacuums. Syria risks losing oil fields to ISIS; Iraq’s fault lines invite resurgence; Yemen aids AQAP; Lebanon tempts jihadists; and Iran faces border threats.

In Yemen, where Houthis battle a crumbling south, AQAP could seize on HTS’s success, potentially making Aden a jihadist hub. Lebanon, reeling from Hezbollah’s 2023-24 clash with Israel and economic collapse, invites Sunni extremists to exploit rifts—Arsal, a militant border town, could be next. Iraq’s rural areas, stalked by ISIS cells, risk resurgence if Baghdad weakens. These nations, scarred by proxy wars and failed governance, face greater threats as HTS’s model hints territorial conquest can win tolerance, if not legitimacy.

The recognition of Syria’s HTS-led government could galvanize terrorist groups within, sparking crises as they emulate territorial takeover for acceptance. The unrest in Jaramana, a Damascus suburb, shows this: Syria sent forces after a militia linked to Assad’s regime killed an officer at a checkpoint, defying surrender. Lieutenant Colonel Hussam al-Tahan told SANA it targets illegal groups, but the clash—amid Israel’s Druze defense claim—reveals how militias, emboldened by HTS, could exploit weak authority. Hurras al-Din and Islamic State might seize territory, worsening chaos post-Assad.

This danger has erupted in Syria’s Alawite coastal strongholds, where security forces clashed with pro-Assad gunmen in Latakia and Tartous in early March 2025, leaving over 130 dead, per the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Turkey and Saudi Arabia’s acceptance of HTS has fueled such unrest, inviting rival factions to seize territory and seek similar recognition. Israel, claiming to protect minorities, and Iran, potentially backing the Alawites, exploit this chaos—pushing Syria toward partition and creating a fractured state where power supersedes law. For global powers, HTS’s recognition poses a strategic quandary. Iran lost Assad—a major blow in the region. The U.S. and allies, vocal on democracy, weigh their anti-Iran stance against an unelected jihadist regime. This gain could falter if HTS turns radical or if Russia and China exploit the playbook, making the Middle East a proxy chessboard.

The strategy—“take territory, wait for acceptance”—worked for the Taliban’s 20-year efforts and HTS’s rapid strike. Without stringent conditions, states risk legitimizing power without elections. Al-Sharaa’s claim on December 30 that elections might take four years met no pushback from the U.S. or Europe—a silence signaling stability over democracy, but at what cost? This precedent erodes core values of international relations, including democracy, accountability, and human rights. HTS’s unelected rule, like the Taliban’s, skirts these norms. De facto engagement—embassies, trade, talks—grants resources without treaty adherence. Their past atrocities—HTS’s civilian attacks, the Taliban’s Al Qaeda ties—go unaddressed, their intentions untested by enforceable promises. Trade with third parties, like China’s mineral deals in Afghanistan or Turkey’s ventures in Syria, risks fueling corruption—Afghanistan’s opium trade now accounts for 90% of the world’s heroin supply, thriving in a governance vacuum.

The rush to recognize HTS reflects a realist scramble: Turkey secures its border, Saudi Arabia counters Iran, the U.S. and Israel weaken Tehran’s proxies—without troops. This low-cost, high-impact model could tempt wider use. States might back ISIS in Iraq or AQAP in Yemen to reshape the region. Turkey’s HTS success hinges on moderation; elsewhere, it risks chaos. The lack of a global standard—each state acting independently—undermines international law’s predictability. UN guidelines tying recognition to elections could align legitimacy without rigidity. For now, HTS fills Assad’s vacuum, but at a cost: A Middle East where terrorists become politicians, eroding democracy in a fragile region. Stability today risks a wildfire tomorrow—unless this game is rethought.

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