



IDEOLOGICAL PRAGMATISM OR DERADICALISATION? A FOUR-DIMENSIONAL ASSESSMENT OF HAY'AT TAHRIR AL-SHAM'S TRANSFORMATION, 2017–2026

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Abstract. The trajectory of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) from an al-Qaeda affiliate to the governing force of a state recognised by the international community poses a problem that existing analytical vocabulary handles poorly. Between July 2025 and August 2026 the organisation and the state it governs were removed from every major terrorist designation regime, yet the empirical basis on which those decisions rested has not been systematically examined. This article argues that the vocabulary of “deradicalisation” misdescribes what has occurred, and proposes an alternative analytical instrument: a spectrum of pragmatic adaptation, disaggregated into four independently observable dimensions – rhetorical, institutional, doctrinal and behavioural. Applying this framework to the period 2017–2026, the study finds that HTS's transformation has been sharply asymmetric. Change is deep and stable in the rhetorical dimension, substantial but incomplete in the institutional dimension, minimal in the doctrinal dimension, and contradicted in the behavioural dimension by the documented mass violence against Alawite civilians on the Syrian coast in March 2025 and against Druze communities in Suwayda in 2025. The article theorises this pattern as a two-tier legitimisation strategy: a secular-statist outer layer addressed to external audiences, and an unreformed doctrinal core retained for internal cohesion. It follows that the indicators on which delisting decisions have relied – public statements and formal commitments – are precisely the cheapest and most reversible signals available to an armed actor, and are therefore the least reliable. Four alternative monitoring indicators are proposed. The article closes with the implications of the model's diffusion potential for Central Asian security, drawing on the unresolved status of Uzbek foreign-fighter formations in Syria.

Keywords: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham; deradicalisation; Salafi-jihadism; rebel governance; Syria; ideological transformation; foreign fighters; Central Asia.

INTRODUCTION

On 8 December 2024 a coalition led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham entered Damascus and ended fifty-four years of Ba'thist rule. On 29 January 2025 the organisation's leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa – until 2016 known within the jihadi milieu as Abu Muhammad

al-Julani – was named president for Syria’s transitional period. A Constitutional Declaration promulgated on 13 March 2025 established a five-year transition; elections to a People’s Assembly were held on 5 October 2025. On 7 July 2025 the United States revoked HTS’s designation as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (United States Department of State, 2025). On 27 February 2026 the United Nations Security Council’s ISIL (Da’esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee removed Jabhat al-Nusra and HTS from its consolidated list (United Nations Security Council, 2026). On 24 August 2026 the United States rescinded Syria’s designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, in place since 1979 (United States Department of State, 2026).

Within twenty months, in other words, an organisation founded as al-Qaeda’s Syrian franchise passed from the most restrictive counter-terrorism regimes in existence to the status of a normalised governing authority. Whether this passage reflects a genuine change in the organisation or a change in the international community’s calculation of interest is a question of considerable analytical and policy importance, and it has been answered largely by assertion rather than by evidence (Phillips, 2016; Hinnebusch, 2012:95–113).

Part of the difficulty is conceptual. The literature on militant transformation offers two dominant frames. The first, deradicalisation, denotes a change in belief: the abandonment of the ideological commitments that legitimised violence. The second, disengagement, denotes a change in behaviour without a corresponding change in belief (Hoffman, 2006). Neither frame accommodates the HTS case comfortably. HTS has not abandoned its ideological commitments – its judicial and religious institutions remain staffed by the same cadre and operate on the same doctrinal premises – but neither has it merely disengaged, since it has undertaken a far-reaching reconstruction of its public language, its administrative apparatus and its external relationships. The organisation occupies a space the existing binary does not name.

This article proposes an instrument for describing that space. It argues, first, that ideological transformation in armed actors should be treated not as a single variable but as a set of four dimensions that vary independently: the rhetorical, the institutional, the doctrinal and the behavioural. It argues, second, that the position of an organisation on each dimension can be assessed against observable evidence, and that the resulting profile is more informative than any aggregate judgement. It argues, third, that the HTS profile for 2017–2026 is markedly asymmetric, and that this asymmetry – not the depth

of change in any single dimension – is the finding of substantive importance. Finally, it argues that the asymmetry has a specific structural explanation: a two-tier legitimisation strategy in which the outer layer is addressed to external audiences whose recognition the organisation requires, while the inner layer preserves the doctrinal commitments on which internal cohesion depends.

MAIN PART

Conceptual background

The analytical separation of belief change from behaviour change has been foundational to terrorism studies since Horgan and Braddock's argument that programmes claiming to deradicalise participants in political violence typically achieve, at most, disengagement, and that conflating the two produces systematically over-optimistic evaluations (Horgan & Braddock, 2010:267–291). Ashour's comparative study of Egyptian and Algerian Islamist organisations refined the distinction by showing that the most durable transformations were those accompanied by explicit doctrinal revision authored by the movement's own ideologues rather than by external actors (Ashour, 2009). The paradigmatic case remains Sayyid Imam al-Sharif ("Dr Fadl"), whose 2007 revisions repudiated arguments he had himself formulated in 1988, and whose authority within the milieu made the repudiation costly to ignore. Two implications follow that bear directly on the present case. First, the presence or absence of a formal doctrinal revision is a meaningful diagnostic, not a formality: it is the one signal that an organisation cannot send cheaply, because it imposes internal costs. Second, the absence of such a revision does not by itself indicate that no change has occurred; it indicates that whatever change has occurred is located elsewhere than in doctrine. The analytical task is therefore to specify where.

Maher's account of Salafi-jihadism as a composite of distinct conceptual strata – tawhid, hakimiyya, al-wala' wa-l-bara', jihad and takfir – assembled at different historical moments and by different authors is the second element of the framework used here (Maher, 2016:8–14). The importance of the layered conception is that it makes selective activation intelligible. An organisation need not repudiate a stratum in order to cease invoking it; it may simply deactivate it while retaining it. Wiktorowicz's earlier typology of the Salafi field, which distinguishes purists, politicians and jihadis by their differing positions on the permissibility and priority of political and violent action

rather than by differing creed, points in the same direction: movement within the field does not require creedal change (Wiktorowicz, 2006:207–239).

Halverson, Goodall and Corman's work on master narratives supplies the third element. Their argument is that Islamist extremist communication operates not through discrete claims but through deep narrative structures with long cultural genealogies, and that these structures shape a community's sense of its own past, its adversaries and its horizon of expectation (Halverson, Goodall & Corman, 2011:15–20). A narrative substitution – replacing one master narrative with another that shares the same underlying archetype – is therefore a cheaper operation than a doctrinal revision, and produces a comparable change in surface communication.

A fourth literature explains why an armed actor holding territory faces incentives that an insurgent actor does not. Resource mobilisation theory, in the classical formulation of McCarthy and Zald, holds that movement behaviour is shaped less by the intensity of grievance than by the resources available to convert grievance into action (McCarthy & Zald, 1977:1212–1241). For a territorially fixed actor the decisive resources – taxation, service provision, external tolerance, cross-border trade – are conditional on the acquiescence of populations and neighbouring states. This produces a systematic pressure towards the moderation of anything that raises the cost of acquiescence, and no corresponding pressure towards the moderation of anything invisible to those audiences.

The empirical literature on HTS governance in Idlib documents this pressure in detail. Keser and Fakhoury trace the group's evolution from insurgent formation to local authority and the construction of a social support base grounded in service delivery rather than ideological adherence (Keser & Fakhoury, 2025:46–66). Grant-Brook's study of the Salvation Government's identity documentation shows how the performance of statehood through bureaucratic artefacts preceded and prepared the claim to statehood itself (Grant-Brook, 2023:850–865). Haenni and Drevon's monograph, the most substantial treatment to date, argues that HTS's trajectory was shaped decisively by pressure from the population it governed – a finding that locates the causal driver of change outside the organisation's ideology altogether (Haenni & Drevon, 2025). Zelin's institutional mapping of post-Assad Syria documents the transposition of the Idlib administrative model onto the national scale (Zelin, 2025).

What the literature does not yet provide is an instrument for assessing these findings jointly. Governance studies establish that HTS's administrative behaviour changed;

ideology studies establish that its conceptual apparatus is layered and selectively activated; deradicalisation studies establish that doctrinal revision is the diagnostic signal. No study has assessed the organisation on all of these registers simultaneously and asked whether the results converge. The present article does so, and finds that they do not – which is itself the principal finding.

Analytical framework: a spectrum of pragmatic adaptation

The framework proposed here replaces the deradicalisation/disengagement binary with a spectrum bounded at one pole by full ideological rigidity – the refusal of any adaptation regardless of cost, of which the Islamic State’s conduct after 2014 is the clearest instance (McCants, 2015) – and at the other by full deradicalisation, understood as documented doctrinal revision accompanied by consistent behavioural change. Between these poles lies the space of pragmatic adaptation, in which an organisation modifies its conduct substantially while preserving an ideological core.

The spectrum is not a single scale. An organisation’s position is assessed separately on four dimensions. The rhetorical dimension concerns the lexicon of public communication: the presence or absence of takfiri and apocalyptic vocabulary, the categories used to describe adversaries, minorities and external states, and the stability of these usages over time and across audiences. The institutional dimension concerns the basis on which governance is exercised: whether administrative authority derives from shari’a-legitimated command or from technical-bureaucratic procedure, and the extent to which ministries, budgets, civil registries and educational standards conform to the secular state model. The doctrinal dimension concerns the conceptual apparatus itself: the composition of shari’a councils and the judiciary, the substantive content of religious education curricula, the practice of fatwa issuance and, above all, the presence or absence of a formal revision of the concepts of takfir, al-wala’ wa-l-bara’ and taghut. The behavioural dimension concerns conduct towards the populations most exposed to the organisation’s doctrinal premises – religious and ethnic minorities – as documented by independent monitors rather than as claimed by the organisation.

Three properties of this framework deserve emphasis. First, the dimensions are ordered by the cost of change: rhetorical adjustment is nearly costless, institutional adjustment carries moderate cost, doctrinal revision is expensive in internal legitimacy, and behavioural change is expensive in coalition management. Second, the dimensions are independently observable, which permits the identification of asymmetry. Third,

asymmetry is theoretically informative: where change is concentrated in the low-cost dimensions and absent from the high-cost ones, the appropriate inference is adaptation rather than transformation, and the appropriate expectation is reversibility.

The structural mechanism that produces such asymmetry is here termed two-tier legitimization. An armed actor seeking both external recognition and internal cohesion faces audiences with incompatible demands. It resolves the incompatibility not by choosing between them but by stratifying its output: a secular-statist register for external consumption and an unaltered doctrinal register for internal consumption. The strategy is stable so long as the two audiences do not observe each other. It becomes visible – as it did in Syria in 2025 – when behaviour in the field renders the inner layer legible to the outer audience.

Data and method

The study is a single-case, theory-testing analysis covering the period from the formation of HTS in January 2017 to August 2026. Four bodies of evidence were used. The first is a corpus of official communication: statements, interviews and formal documents issued by HTS, the Syrian Salvation Government and, after December 2024, the transitional authorities, examined for the presence, frequency and stability of doctrinally marked vocabulary. The second is institutional documentation: the Constitutional Declaration of 13 March 2025, ministerial and administrative arrangements, and the secondary institutional mapping literature (Zelin, 2025). The third is documented human rights reporting on conduct towards minorities, restricted to sources that specify methodology and evidentiary basis: the reports of the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International (United Nations, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025; Amnesty International, 2025; United Nations, 2026). The fourth is the specialist research literature on foreign-fighter formations and their post-2024 integration (Collins, 2025; Shtuni, 2026; International Crisis Group, 2026).

The analytical procedure was as follows. Each dimension was assessed independently against its own evidentiary base, without reference to the assessment of the others, in order to avoid the halo effect by which a strong finding on one register colours the reading of another. Each assessment was then classified on a four-point ordinal scale: deep and stable, substantial but incomplete, marginal, or contradicted.

Only after all four assessments were complete were they compared and the resulting profile interpreted.

Three limitations must be stated. First, the doctrinal dimension is assessed partly on the absence of evidence – no formal revision has been published – and absence of evidence is weaker than evidence of absence, though in this case the expected artefact is a public document whose non-appearance is itself observable. Second, access to the internal deliberations of the organisation is not available, and inferences about internal cohesion are therefore indirect. Third, the period under study is short relative to the timescales on which ideological change is normally assessed, and the findings should be read as an assessment of trajectory rather than of endpoint.

Findings

The transformation of HTS's public lexicon is the most complete of the four changes and the easiest to document. The shift began well before December 2024 – the 2016 rebranding as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and the 2017 formation of HTS were both accompanied by a narrowing of stated objectives from the transnational to the Syrian – but it accelerated sharply after the capture of Damascus. From January 2025 the corpus of official statements is essentially free of takfiri and apocalyptic vocabulary. The categories that organised jihadi communication for two decades – taghut applied to Muslim rulers, al-wala' wa-l-bara' as a template for external relations, the eschatological framing of the Syrian conflict as a theatre of the malhama – are absent. In their place appears a stable set of secular-political terms: the inclusive state, equality of citizens, national unity, economic recovery, international cooperation, institutional reconstruction. The Constitutional Declaration of 13 March 2025 is drafted throughout in this register. Two features of the change deserve emphasis. The first is its stability: rhetorical moderation by armed actors is frequently audience-dependent, with a moderate register for international interlocutors and a militant register for domestic constituencies, yet no such bifurcation is observable in the HTS corpus after January 2025. The second is its consistency across the leadership, since the change is not confined to al-Sharaa's own communication but extends through the ministerial and provincial levels. In terms of the framework proposed here, however, both features are precisely what the low cost of rhetorical adjustment would predict. A change that costs nothing can be executed thoroughly and maintained indefinitely; its thoroughness is therefore not evidence of its depth.

The institutional record shows genuine and consequential change alongside conspicuous continuity. On the side of change, the basis of administration has been transposed from shari'a-legitimated command to technical-bureaucratic procedure. Ministries have been constituted on the standard model; a budget process has been established; civil registration and documentation have been brought onto a state footing, extending a practice the Salvation Government had already developed in Idlib (Grant-Brook, 2023:850–865); educational standards have been aligned with the secular state model. The Constitutional Declaration established a five-year transitional framework, and elections to a People's Assembly were conducted on 5 October 2025. Whatever the quality of these processes, they are not the institutions of an insurgent organisation. On the side of continuity, the internal command architecture of the armed formations and the composition of their cadre have been substantially preserved. The most consequential instance is the integration of foreign fighters: from June 2025 approximately 3,500 foreign combatants were assigned to the 84th Division, a special-forces formation headquartered at the Naval Academy in Latakia, and three foreign commanders had been promoted to brigadier general in December 2024 (Shtuni, 2026). Estimates of the total foreign contingent remaining in Syria range from 3,500 to 10,000, with roughly 5,000 as the most defensible middle figure (Shtuni, 2026). Integration here denotes the incorporation of existing units, with their existing chains of command, into the formal military structure – an administrative operation rather than a transformative one. The dimension is therefore classified as substantially but incompletely changed: the civil administration has been reconstructed on a new basis; the coercive apparatus has been relabelled.

The doctrinal dimension shows the least movement of the four, and the assessment rests on four observations. First, the composition of the shari'a councils and the judiciary has not been substantially reformed: the cadre that administered religious-legal authority in Idlib continues to administer it. Second, no revision of the substantive legal doctrine has been promulgated, and the jurisprudential premises on which the Idlib judiciary operated remain the premises on which the successor institutions operate. Third, and most significantly, no formal doctrinal revision of the concepts of takfir, al-wala' wa-l-bara' or taghut has been published. These concepts have been removed from public rhetoric; they have not been reconsidered. The distinction is not academic: removal

from rhetoric is reversible at no cost and leaves the conceptual apparatus intact and available, whereas revision is costly, public and difficult to retract – which is precisely why, in Ashour’s account, it is the diagnostic of durable transformation (Ashour, 2009). The contrast with the Sayyid Imam precedent is instructive: there the revision was authored by the ideologue whose earlier work it repudiated, published under his name and argued on the same source-critical terrain as the original. Nothing comparable has been produced in the Syrian case. Fourth, the content of religious education has not been made the object of announced reform, and no independent assessment of curricular content has been published. The dimension is therefore classified as marginally changed: the organisation has ceased to deploy its doctrinal apparatus publicly, but it has not dismantled or revised it. In the terms of Maher’s layered model, the strata have been deactivated, not removed (Maher, 2016:8–14).

The behavioural dimension provides the strongest test of the framework, because it is the register in which the deactivated doctrinal layer becomes observable. In March 2025 mass violence took place in the coastal governorates of Latakia and Tartus. The United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry, reporting on 14 August 2025, found the violence to have been widespread and systematic and to include acts likely amounting to war crimes: murder, torture, inhumane treatment of the dead, looting and arson displacing tens of thousands. Approximately 1,400 people were reported killed, predominantly civilians. The Commission documented a consistent pattern in which men identified as Alawi were separated from women and children and then executed, and found that members of factions recently incorporated into the interim government’s security forces were among the perpetrators (United Nations, 2025). A national inquiry established by the transitional authorities reported a comparable death toll in July 2025. Human Rights Watch documented the same pattern of identity-based killing in a report published on 23 September 2025 (Human Rights Watch, 2025). In 2025 further violence occurred against the Druze community of Suwayda: Amnesty International’s investigation, published in September 2025, found evidence that government and affiliated forces had extrajudicially executed dozens of Druze civilians (Amnesty International, 2025), and the Commission of Inquiry subsequently documented grave violations in the July 2025 escalation in Sweida (United Nations, 2026).

The analytical significance of these events lies in a specific relation. The pattern the Commission documents – identification by confessional affiliation followed by execution – is not incidental brutality of the kind common to armed conflict. It is the operational expression of a doctrinal premise: that confessional identity is itself a legally salient category determining the treatment owed to a person. That premise is the practical content of takfir applied collectively, and it is the premise that the rhetorical shift of January 2025 removed from public language without revising. The events of 2025 demonstrate that removal from language did not remove it from operative practice. The dimension is therefore classified as contradicted: the change observable in the rhetorical and institutional registers is not reflected in conduct towards the populations most exposed to the unreformed doctrine.

Dimension	Cost of change	Assessment	Principal evidentiary basis
Rhetorical	Very low	Deep and stable	Corpus of official statements, 2025–2026; Constitutional Declaration
Institutional	Moderate	Substantial but incomplete	Ministerial and constitutional arrangements; 84th Division integration
Doctrinal	High (internal legitimacy)	Marginal	Absence of published revision; continuity of judicial cadre
Behavioural	High (coalition management)	Contradicted	UN Commission of Inquiry; Human Rights Watch; Amnesty International

Table 1. Assessment of HTS transformation by dimension, 2017–2026

The profile is asymmetric in a specific and interpretable way: change is complete where it is cheap and absent where it is expensive. Ordering the four dimensions by cost reproduces almost exactly their ordering by degree of change. This is the article’s central empirical finding, and it warrants a precise formulation. HTS has moved a substantial distance from the pole of full ideological rigidity. It has not approached the pole of full deradicalisation. Its position on the spectrum is not a point but a distribution: close to the political pole on the rhetorical and institutional dimensions, close to the jihadi pole on the doctrinal and behavioural ones. The transformation is real and it is partial,

and the partiality is structured rather than random. The theoretical inference is that the stability of ideological transformation is measured not by the depth of rhetorical change but by the presence of doctrinal change. A transformation distributed as HTS's is distributed retains, by construction, the capacity to reverse: the conceptual apparatus that would license a return to earlier practice has not been dismantled, and the cadre capable of operating it remains in place.

DISCUSSION

International practice in assessing the ideological trajectory of armed actors relies principally on two classes of signal: public statements and formal commitments. The framework developed here explains why these are the least reliable indicators available. Signal reliability in strategic settings is a function of cost: a signal that is cheap to send conveys little information, because an actor with any type can afford to send it. Public statements and formal commitments are the cheapest signals in an armed actor's repertoire – they require no internal negotiation, impose no cost on cadre and can be retracted or reinterpreted at will – and they are correspondingly the signals most readily produced in response to the prospect of sanctions relief. The delisting sequence of 2025–2026 relied substantially on this class of evidence. The revocation of the FTO designation in July 2025 preceded by six weeks the Commission of Inquiry's finding that the March violence had been widespread and systematic (United States Department of State, 2025; United Nations, 2025). The Security Council delisting of February 2026 and the rescission of the State Sponsor of Terrorism designation in August 2026 followed the publication of both the Commission's coastal findings and Amnesty International's Suwayda investigation (United Nations Security Council, 2026; United States Department of State, 2026). The sequence is not evidence that the decisions were wrong – they may be justified on grounds of engagement strategy – but it is evidence that they were not driven by the behavioural record.

Four alternative indicators follow from the framework, ordered by diagnostic value: the composition of shari'a-legal institutions, that is, whether the cadre administering religious-legal authority has been changed and on what criteria; the content of religious education curricula, assessed independently rather than through announced intentions; documented conduct towards religious and ethnic minorities, treated as the primary

rather than the corroborating evidence; and the existence of published doctrinal revisions authored by figures with standing in the milieu. Each of these is costly to fake and slow to change, which is what makes them informative. Each is also, at present, either unmeasured or measured negatively in the Syrian case.

The second implication concerns diffusion. HTS has demonstrated, in a manner visible to every armed Islamist movement with territorial ambitions, that a path exists from designated terrorist organisation to recognised governing authority which does not require doctrinal revision. The demonstrated sequence—narrow the stated objectives from transnational to national; build administrative capacity; secure a regional patron; adjust public language comprehensively; retain the doctrinal core—is replicable, and Haenni and Drevon note that its lessons are already a subject of discussion within the jihadi field (Haenni & Drevon, 2025). For Central Asian states the consequence is a change in the detection problem. Conventional counter-extremism indicators are calibrated to detect violence and overt takfiri rhetoric; a propagation strategy that counsels the postponement of both—presenting gradual accommodation rather than confrontation as the route to influence—is invisible to those indicators by design. Detection would require monitoring instruments oriented to organisational and doctrinal continuity rather than to rhetorical and behavioural markers, which is to say instruments of exactly the kind proposed above.

The third implication is specific to Central Asia and concerns the transformation of a risk rather than its elimination. Collins's study of the two principal Uzbek formations in Syria—Katibat Imam al-Bukhari and Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad—establishes three findings relevant here. First, the formations are substantial: KIB numbered approximately 500–1,000 fighters in Syria with additional hundreds in Afghanistan, and KTJ approximately 500, with a comparable Afghan presence. Second, both maintained their allegiance to al-Qaeda after HTS's declared break with the organisation, and their ideological orientation did not change with HTS's. Third, both participated actively in the December 2024 offensive and were subsequently drawn into the integration process (Collins, 2025).

Shtuni's analysis of that process identifies the mechanism by which integration alters rather than removes the risk. Foreign combatants have been incorporated into formal military structures while retaining their unit integrity and command relationships; the question of citizenship has been deferred to the permanent constitution, leaving legal status

unresolved for a transitional period running to approximately 2030; and international oversight has been reduced to periodic congressionally mandated review (Shtuni, 2026). The International Crisis Group's assessment reaches comparable conclusions about the limits of central control over these formations (International Crisis Group, 2026). Three consequences follow for Central Asian security policy. The first is legal: a person who was a member of a proscribed formation under an international sanctions regime becomes a serviceman of a sovereign state, which substantially complicates the application of extradition, sanctions and financial monitoring mechanisms. The second concerns resources: a unit within a state structure obtains regular supply, formal training and lawful access to weapons. The third concerns predictability: where integration preserves unit-level cohesion, agreements concluded with the central authority are not necessarily binding on constituent formations. These consequences should not be read as uniformly negative. Incorporation into a state structure creates, in principle, the possibility of formal oversight, accountability and eventual demobilisation, and reduces the likelihood of defection to more radical competitors – a dynamic that has been observed in the region. The situation is properly assessed as simultaneously a risk and an opportunity, whose resolution depends on the policy of the Syrian authorities and on coordination among the interested states.

The findings are subject to the limitations noted above and to two further qualifications. First, the doctrinal assessment would be substantially strengthened by systematic content analysis of judicial rulings and religious curricula, which is not currently possible on available material; the establishment of such access would be the single most valuable contribution to the research question. Second, the framework has been applied to one case, and its analytical value would be tested most directly by application to comparable cases of armed actors undergoing partial transformation under conditions of territorial control.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the transformation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham between 2017 and 2026 is not adequately described as deradicalisation, and has proposed a four-dimensional spectrum of pragmatic adaptation as an alternative analytical instrument.

Applied to the case, the framework yields a clear result. Change has been deep and stable in the rhetorical dimension, substantial but incomplete in the institutional

dimension, marginal in the doctrinal dimension, and contradicted in the behavioural dimension by the documented violence against Alawite and Druze civilians in 2025. Ordering the dimensions by the cost of change reproduces their ordering by degree of change, which is what a strategy of adaptation rather than transformation would predict.

The theoretical contribution is the proposition that the durability of ideological change in armed actors is a function of doctrinal rather than rhetorical movement, and that a transformation concentrated in the low-cost dimensions is by construction reversible. The policy contribution is the corollary: assessments that rely on public statements and formal commitments rely on the least informative evidence available, and should be replaced by indicators calibrated to institutional composition, curricular content, documented conduct towards minorities and published doctrinal revision.

Whether the Syrian transformation consolidates or reverses is not determined by the evidence assembled here. What the evidence does establish is that the question remains open, and that the conceptual apparatus which would license a reversal has not been dismantled.

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