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Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
◌َ	a		◌ًا، ◌ًى	an
◌ُ	u		◌ٌو	un
◌ِ	i		◌ٍي	in
◌َا، ◌ٰ، ◌َى،	ā		◌َوْ	aw
◌ُو	ū		◌َيْ	ay
◌ِي	ī		◌ُوّ	uww, ū (in final position)
			◌ِيّ	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: http://rotas.iium.edu.my

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Book Review

Haenni, Patrick & Drevon, Jerome. (2025). *Transformed by the people: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's road to power in Syria* (315 pp.) Hurst & Company. ISBN: 9781805264101

Reviewer: Mohamed Fouz Mohamed Zacky, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and Madani Studies, International Islamic University Malaysia. Email: zackyfouz@iium.edu.my

Many observers continue to struggle to make sense of the rapid transformations in Syrian politics, from the fall of Bashar al-Assad to the rise of Ahmed al-Sharaa. Equally puzzling for many has been the manner in which global powers have begun to engage with the new Syrian leadership, including the easing of restrictions surrounding the once–most-wanted militant extremist organisation, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

In response, two dominant strands of debate have emerged across social media, policy, and journalistic commentary. One strand resorts to conspiracy theories, claiming that HTS functions as a covert agent of the United States and Israel (Sanar, 2024). The other acknowledges HTS's past as a terrorist organisation but argues that the movement has merely altered its external posture for pragmatic political purposes (Aldoughli & Al Kassir, 2021) .

These competing interpretations reveal a broader analytical difficulty in interpreting the current transformation: the emergence of political leaders who were once associated with violent extremist organisations such as Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, and who now seek to present themselves as legitimate political actors on the international stage. Even more intriguing within this debate is the absence of clear historical records indicating that these leaders, or HTS itself, have formally renounced terrorism or articulated a coherent ideological shift toward moderation.

The book by Patrick Haenni and Jerome Drevon makes an important contribution to the developing debates on the origins, evolution, and eventual de-radicalisation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The authors argue that the group's trajectory of de-radicalisation has been unconventional, gradual, pragmatic, and ultimately sustainable. It is unconventional in the sense that HTS did not formally revise its Salafist ideological schema at any stage of its evolution. Rather, as the authors note, 'HTS's transformation stemmed from a series of tactical choices that gradually acquired a strategic dimension' (p.241) Put differently, 'HTS did not evolve through rigid adherence to doctrine; rather, it adapted to shifting political realities, and these adaptations progressively reshaped its ideological framework' (p.04) The book's central argument, therefore, is that through a series of strategic choices made in the struggle for power and in the fight against Bashar al-Assad, HTS inadvertently positioned itself as a more centrist actor within the Syrian Sunni political landscape. This argument not only reframes prevailing interpretations of HTS's trajectory but also sets the stage for a nuanced examination of how militant movements can transform through practice rather than formal ideological revision.

In unpacking its central argument, the book traces the trajectory of de-radicalisation within Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) across several critical fault lines. It begins by examining dominant perspectives on the influence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and later alQaeda in Syria following the uprising. These perspectives suggest that both organisations exploited the militarisation of the revolution to consolidate their presence within the conflict. Within this context, the formation of AlNusra Front emerged as a key development, established in Syria under the leadership of Ahmed alSharaa (better known previously as Abu Mohammad alJulani), who had previously served as a commander within ISIS. In contrast, the authors highlight that the Al-Nusra Front, the initial al-Qaeda branch in Syria, was conceived and solely directed by Al-Sharaa, operating entirely autonomously from other extremist factions in Iraq (p.18-22). From the outset, Al-Sharaa framed his movement as focused on a local cause and explicitly rejected international operations. Whenever Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or al-Qaeda sought to exert control over Al-Nusra Front or pressured its leader to adhere more strictly to jihadist principles, such as targeting minorities, Shiʿa communities, or non-jihadist actors, the authors show that 'Al-Sharaa

consistently rejected the idea of foreign operations and attacks on civilians based on their religious affiliation, whether they were Shia or Alawite' (p.22) This suggests that the group's strategic orientation, even at an early stage, was shaped by considerations distinct from the more radical and indiscriminate approaches adopted by jihadist networks operating in Iraq. This is not to suggest, however, that al-Sharaa recruited an entirely new constituency of fighters in Syria. The majority of the movement's members were drawn from Salafi-jihadist milieus, and the organisation continued to employ Salafi-jihadist discourse. Yet, according to the authors, maintaining this ideological orientation was largely a pragmatic choice: overt ideological flexibility risked alienating rank-and-file fighters, many of whom might otherwise defect to more hardline factions (p. 30-33).

Haenni and Drevon further highlight that HTS's de-radicalisation deepened after it became the dominant force in Idlib province, formalised through the 2017 establishment of the Salvation Government. Significantly, this was the moment when HTS fully transformed into a centrist force. As the de facto ruler of the only rebel-controlled province in Syria, HTS was compelled to evolve beyond a militant front into a regional administrator. This transformation was complex: the landlocked province required engagement with local populations and technocrats, as well as coordination with international aid organisations and foreign states, to maintain both authority and popular support. In navigating these governance responsibilities, HTS gradually set aside many of its Salafi-Jihadist assumptions, pragmatically engaging with diverse actors to consolidate power, a practical and ongoing process of de-radicalisation. This was not an easy process, as the movement's core base remained grounded in Salafi-Jihadist ideological precepts. The authors aptly capture this transformation, noting that 'the Salvation Government (SG) was not merely about administering territory, but served as a deliberate mechanism to dismantle HTS's radical legacy, adapt to geopolitical constraints, and neutralise internal hardliners.' Importantly, they state that 'HTS's de-radicalisation was not born of theological epiphanies, but out of the pragmatic, bureaucratic necessities of consolidating power and governing a state.' (p.69-95).

Chapters 4-8 provide a detailed account of how HTS managed its internal hardliners who adhered to a Salafi-jihadist ideological framework that stood in the way of the organisation's emerging project

of pragmatic governance in Idlib. Rather than directly confronting or formally revising the Salafi-Jihadi ideological precepts, HTS adopted a strategy of regulation, purging, and the institutionalisation of religious education across the region. These measures gradually diluted and marginalised the ideological core of the movement, paving the way for a new generation of fighters less exposed to transnational jihadist doctrines. For instance, the authors note that when radical hardline preachers and texts began to challenge HTS's engagement with local society and the international community, the organisation moved to restructure the training manuals used for fighters and officers. Global jihadist literature was removed and replaced with more moderate Islamic guidebooks. At the same time, HTS promoted the codification of Islamic law in order to limit the influence of radical clerical fatwas, while introducing elements of traditionalist jurisprudence to make religious teaching and legal judgments more predictable and administratively manageable. HTS, a movement long associated with violent extremism, has begun to develop its own version of counter-terrorism (p.95-139). An even more intriguing dimension of this evolution, driven by the logic of governance, is that while diluting Salafi-jihadist elements, HTS also allowed previously suppressed Sufi communities to re-emerge as part of its effort to broaden social legitimacy and manage the movement's hardline base. In doing so, HTS appeared to replicate a strategy long employed by several Arab authoritarian regimes, co-opting Sufi networks to counter religious populists who might disrupt the prevailing power balance. As the authors note, 'HTS leadership realised that the Sufi community was politically quietist and posed no threat to their rule, unlike the disruptive Salafi populists' (139-155).

After demonstrating how the logic of governance, rather than ideology, reshaped a well-known Salafi-jihadist organisation like HTS, the book raises an important question: can this transformation be considered genuine, or might the movement re-radicalise if conditions once again become conducive to it? Examining the internal changes within the organisation, including reforms in education, curricula, training practices, the purging of radical elements, and broader efforts at rebranding, Haenni and Drevon argue that 'this transformation reinforced a self-sustaining dynamic. Through gradual and tactical departures from its original Salafi worldview, the movement crossed the threshold of no return' (p.247). Drawing from the HTS experience, the book ultimately

offers an important perspective on de-radicalisation, which is often assumed to begin with the denunciation of ideology and the embrace of moderate theology. Instead, the authors argue that the case of HTS demonstrates how 'ideological reorientation often occurs more through practice than formal ideological shifts… Political calculations and power struggles drive the shift in ideas, not doctrinal revolutions' (p.272). This insight offers a compelling reminder that ideological transformation within militant movements may emerge less from theological revision than from the practical demands of governance and political survival.

All in all, this book offers a fascinating study of the political sociology of the HTS movement and its pathway of de-radicalisation. It provides an insightful perspective on the organisation, as the authors draw on extensive first-hand engagement with its leadership, having lived among and interacted closely with key figures of the movement. This proximity allows them to capture the nuances of HTS's internal debates, strategic recalibrations, and ideological shifts that are often inaccessible to outside observers. By situating these developments within the broader dynamics of the Syrian conflict and the spectrum of political Islamist movements, the book sheds light on how militant organisations evolve under political and social pressures, while also highlighting what distinguishes HTS from other factions in the Middle East. For years to come, this contribution is likely to remain a formidable reference for scholars seeking to understand the movement's past trajectory and to assess its future role as its leaders navigate the evolving political landscape of contemporary Syria. An important observation of the book is that the authors deliberately distance their analysis from the dominant de-radicalisation frameworks commonly associated with the counter-terrorism paradigm. They explicitly state that the work *'is not a blueprint for Preventing Violent Extremism'* (p.212). Although the book does not seek to provide such a blueprint, the legacy of HTS remains deeply intertwined with some of the most prominent violent extremist movements in the region. Therefore, it would still be pertinent to engage more directly with the question of de-radicalisation. Situating the case within existing de-radicalisation debates and critically assessing prevailing approaches could help identify key gaps as well as illuminate potential future directions in the broader discourse.

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Al-Kassimi, Khaled. (2022). *International law, Necropolitics, and Arab lives: The legalization of creative chaos in Arabia* (1st ed., 318 pp.). Routledge. ISBN 978-1-032-30714-5.

Reviewer: Nath Aldalala'a, Professor of International Relations, Department of Political Science and Madani Studies, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Malaysia. Email: alnath@iium.edu.my

International Law, Necropolitics, and Arab Lives makes a significant contribution to contemporary debates on international law, sovereignty, and violence by interrogating the foundations of *jus gentium*, the body of law historically understood as governing relations among political communities. Originating in Roman law and later elaborated by scholastic jurists, *jus gentium* came to denote a universal legal order grounded in reason rather than revelation and was subsequently institutionalised as modern international law through secular, positivist jurisprudence. Khaled Al-Kassimi's central claim is that this universalist legal project is not merely uneven in its application, but structurally necropolitical in its effects on Arab life.

Anna Agathangelou, in her foreword, presents the book as a necessary contribution that exposes *jus gentium* as a violent epistemological structure and situates it as an uncompromising critique of Latin European modernity grounded in a reassertion of Arab epistemological and juridical self-understanding beyond the frameworks of secular sovereignty. She observes that, by interrogating the collation of *jus gentium*, Al-Kassimi seeks to clarify what Arabs have long attempted

GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS

Intellectual Discourse is an academic, refereed journal, published twice a year. Four types of contributions are considered for publication in this journal: major articles reporting findings of original research; review articles synthesising important deliberations related to disciplines within the domain of Islamic sciences; short research notes or communications, containing original ideas or discussions on vital issues of contemporary concern, and book reviews; and brief reader comments, or statements of divergent viewpoints.

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2. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with a 1-inch (2.5 cm) margins. Use 12-point Times New Roman font.
3. Manuscripts should adhere to the *American Psychological Association* (APA) style*,* latest edition.
4. The title should be as concise as possible and should appear on a separate sheet together with name(s) of the author(s), affiliation(s), and the complete postal address of the institute(s).
5. A short running title of not more than 40 characters should also be included.
6. Headings and sub-headings of different sections should be clearly indicated.
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Book
In-text citations:
Al-Faruqi & al-Faruqi (1986)

Reference:
Al-Faruqi, I. R., & al-Faruqi, L. L. (1986). *The cultural atlas of Islam*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Chapter in a Book
In-text:
Alias (2009)

Reference:
Alias, A. (2009). Human nature. In N. M. Noor (Ed.), *Human nature from an Islamic perspective: A guide to teaching and learning* (pp.79-117). Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press.

Journal Article
In-text:
Chapra (2002)

Reference:
Chapra, M. U. (2002). Islam and the international debt problem. *Journal of Islamic Studies, 10*, 214-232.

The Qur'ān
In-text:
(i) direct quotation, write as 30:36
(ii) indirect quotation, write as Qur'ān, 30:36

Reference:
The glorious Qur'ān. Translation and commentary by A. Yusuf Ali (1977). US: American Trust Publications.

Ḥadīth
In-text:
(i) Al-Bukhārī, 88:204 (where 88 is the book number, 204 is the ḥadīth number)
(ii) Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, p. 1

Reference:
(i) Al-Bukhārī, M. (1981). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.
(ii) Ibn Ḥanbal, A. (1982). *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari.

The Bible
In-text:
Matthew 12:31-32

Reference:
The new Oxford annonated Bible. (2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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