# Islamist Perspectives on the Concept of the Civic State in the Arab World

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary Arab political discourse, the "civic state" (*dawla madaniyya*) has emerged as a deeply contested concept, often framed against both theocratic and secular models. Islamist movements hold diverse views, with reformists seeking to harmonise the civic state with an Islamic reference (*marja'iyya*), while rejectionists denounce any system not grounded in divine sovereignty. This paper interrogates these tensions through a critical examination of the positions adopted by leading Islamist formations and thinkers towards the civic state, with particular attention to the case of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria.

HTS has skilfully adopted the language and structures of civic governance to legitimise its rule; however, its approach is a facade for an authoritarian core. Both in its Idlib proto-state and after the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024, power has been monopolised by its security and religious bodies, subverting the principles of institutional independence and the rule of law. Syria's recent trajectory therefore highlights a significant regional risk: what if civic rhetoric is used by illiberal actors to mask and entrench a new, more sophisticated form of authoritarian rule?

Keywords: *Civic state; civil state, Islamism, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Syria, governance.*

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# Introduction

The concept of the "civic state" (or "civil state") has become a focal point of political debates in the Arab world, particularly in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings. The term, which lacks a singular definition, is often positioned as an alternative to both "theocratic" and secular state models. While it broadly refers to a state governed by laws and institutions rather than religious authorities or military rule, its interpretation varies among different political actors, particularly Islamist movements.

Islamists are not in agreement on the meaning of th "civic state", nor have they developed a uniform stance regarding it. While some Islamists advocate for a civic state with an Islamic reference, aligning with democratic norms while maintaining the role of sharia as a guiding principle, others reject the civic state altogether as a Western import that is incompatible with Islamic governance. This paper explores these varying perspectives, examining the positions of different Islamist actors in the Arab world, particularly in the Levant, and assessing the broader ideological and political implications.

# I. The Civic State: Concept and Context

## A. Theoretical Framework of the Civic State

In its broadest theoretical sense, the civic state is the antithesis of a theocratic state, where religious authorities hold the reins of power. It is also distinct from a military state, where the armed forces dominate strategic decision-making.

In early modern political theory,[1] the "civic" state was simply the institutional antithesis of both divine and feudal authority, and thus virtually synonymous with the emerging modern state. In contemporary Arab thought, however, the notion of *dawla madaniyya* (civic state) has acquired a richer, normative meaning: still civilian and nontheocratic, but now also predicated on constitutional supremacy, equal citizenship, and the rule of law.[2] Not every modern state therefore qualifies as *civic*.

In current debates in the Arab world, a key feature of the civic state is *the rule of law*, where governance is conducted through institutions. Maintaining the rule of law means that political authority is derived from a social contract rather than religious or divine legitimacy; it also means that rulers govern according to clear and established rules rather than arbitrarily, impulsively, or based on personal whims. The rule of law is the cornerstone of *citizenship-based governance*, ensuring that all individuals are equal before the law regardless of their ethnic, religious, or ideological backgrounds.[3]

1 Hobbes's "civil state" and Locke's "civil government" are the classic examples.
2 One primary legal text that encapsulates this normative sense is Article 2 of the 2014 Constitution of the Tunisian Republic, which declares: "Tunisia is a civil state based on citizenship, the will of the people, and the supremacy of law."
3 Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1977).

In this article, the civic state refers to a civilian, non-theocratic, and non-military polity in which authority is exercised through accountable institutions under the rule of law. Its legitimacy is grounded in citizenship and equality before the law, ensuring that no religious or military authority dominates the state. While allowing room for religious values in public life, it rejects clerical rule and positions itself between secularism and theocracy. In this sense, only modern states that uphold constitutional supremacy, equal rights, and the protection of fundamental freedoms can be described as "civic".

## B. The Civic State in Arab Political Discourse

In the Arab world, the term "civic state" has often been employed strategically to avoid the negative connotations associated with theocratic and sectarian rule and secularism. Given the contentious nature of secularism, often perceived as anti-religious due to historical conflicts between nationalist regimes and Islamist groups, *dawla madaniyya* (civic state) emerged as a more politically palatable concept. This linguistic choice allows political actors to engage in discussions about governance and equal citizenship without invoking terms that might antagonise religious or conservative constituencies.

Unlike secularism, which demands a clear separation between religion and state institutions, the common understanding of the civic state allows greater flexibility in expressing religious identity in public life. This perceived flexibility may explain why it is becoming an attractive proposition for Islamist movements seeking to balance religious values with modern governance. However, the exact contours of this integration remain a matter of dispute among Islamist movements and organisations.

In this regard, Islamic thinker Mohamed Emara argues that all human institutions are inherently civic by nature, including mosques and churches, as they are not established through direct divine revelation. He contends that the debate surrounding the concept of the civic state is not about its civic nature per se, but rather its source of authority (*marja'iyya*).[4] The key question, he suggests, is whether the state should derive its laws from a secular framework that separates religion from governance or from Islamic sharia as the ultimate guiding principle. This distinction is crucial to understanding the varying perspectives on the concept of the civic state in the Arab world. Moreover, beyond its ideological and legal dimensions, the question of the civic state has become deeply intertwined with the power dynamics that shape political authority and discourse in the region.

## C. Power Dynamics and the Civic State

The debate over the civic state in the Arab world cannot be disentangled from the power dynamics that have historically shaped political governance in the region. The contestation over the role of religion in the state is not merely an ideological or constitutional issue, it reflects deep-seated struggles between different power centres, including authoritarian regimes, Islamist movements, liberal groups, civil society actors, and Western influences.

[4] Muhammad Emara, *Misr bayn al-dawla al-diniyya wal-madaniyya* [Egypt Between the Religious and Civic State] (Cairo: Wahba Library, 2011), 51.

Authoritarian rulers have historically instrumentalised the binary opposition between secularism and Islamism to consolidate power, either by co-opting religious institutions to bolster their legitimacy or by suppressing Islamist groups under the pretext of preserving a "modern" state.[5] Meanwhile, Islamist movements have often framed their struggle in terms of resistance against foreign-imposed secularism, a narrative shaped by the legacy of European colonialism, which imposed legal and political structures that sought to marginalise Islamic jurisprudence in favour of Western legal codes.[6]

The role of civil society and liberal forces in these debates has been equally complex. While many civil society actors advocate for democratic governance, the liberal camp remains divided between those who support a strict secular model and those who seek a middle ground that embraces and accommodates public expressions of cultural and religious identities.[7] The West, particularly through its interventions, aid policies, and diplomatic engagements, has often reinforced these tensions by alternately supporting authoritarian regimes for stability while simultaneously promoting democracy and civil liberties, creating contradictions in Western policy toward the Arab world.[8] These power struggles have rendered the civic state an inherently contested concept, where its implementation is not solely a matter of theoretical agreement but is rather a battleground for competing visions of governance, legitimacy, and historical identity in the postcolonial Arab world.

Within this landscape of competing power dynamics and historical grievances, Islamist movements have articulated diverse and evolving positions on the civic state, reflecting several points of tension and disagreement.

## D. Points of Tension

Islamist engagement with the civic state model reveals several points of tension, particularly regarding the role of sharia in legislation. While some movements, such as Ennahda– a popular Islamist party in Tunisia that has repositioned itself as a Muslim democratic movement[9] – advocate for a flexible interpretation that aligns with democratic principles, others insist on a stricter application that may conflict with ideals of equality and pluralism. This debate remains a core point of contention, shaping how different Islamist actors frame their approach to governance.

Another critical challenge is the question of minority rights. The civic state model is based on equal rights and protections for all citizens, regardless of religious or ethnic background, yet many Islamist movements have struggled to fully address these concerns. In societies with significant religious diversity, the reluctance to embrace a universal model of citizenship has led to widespread criticism and concerns over exclusionary governance.

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5 Azzam Al Kassir, "Formalising Regime Control over Syrian Religious Affairs," *Sada: Carnegie–Middle East* (blog), November 14, 2018, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.
6 Wael B. Hallaq, *Sharī'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
7 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).
8 Nicola Pratt, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007).
9 Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Ennahda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

The principle of separating religion and state adds another layer of complexity. While many Islamist groups reject secularism,[10] engaging with the civic state often requires navigating a middle ground, one that accommodates religious values without imposing them on all citizens. This balancing act can lead to accusations of inconsistency or opportunism, particularly when Islamist groups adjust their rhetoric based on political expediency.

These debates reflect broader struggles over governance and identity in the Arab world, with Islamist movements playing a significant role in shaping the discourse. Some advocate for a civic state that integrates Islamic principles within a democratic framework, while others reject the model in favour of alternative governance visions. As Arab societies continue to grapple with governance challenges, the civic state debate, alongside Islamists' role within it, will remain central to discussions on political transition and stability, which is a reality evidenced by the recent historical experiences of Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria.

Islamists' stances and understandings of the civic state vary, but it is important to resist the temptation to assume that all Islamist groups have developed a well-thought-out or coherent stance on the issue. A closer look at their statements and discourse often reveals a lack of depth and theoretical clarity, with the concept being treated opportunistically rather than as part of a coherent ideological framework. More often than not, Islamists approach the idea pragmatically, indirectly, and sometimes with clear suspicion, shaping their engagement around political necessity rather than a genuine commitment to its principles.

Rather than drawing on established political thought or engaging in a structured debate about the civic state, some groups create their own versions of the concept, adapting it to fit their immediate goals while sidestepping its fundamental implications. Their use of the term is often context-dependent, shifting with political pressures and strategic considerations rather than stemming from a clear ideological foundation. In many cases, references to the civic state serve more as a political signal, to appear flexible and open, rather than a meaningful endorsement of its core ideas. Recognising this pattern helps differentiate rhetorical manoeuvring from actual ideological evolution, allowing for a more critical assessment of how Islamist actors position themselves in relation to governance and statehood.

## II. Islamist Perspectives on the Civic State

Islamist positions on the civic state range from conditional endorsement to outright rejection. The following typology categorises the dominant Islamist perspectives:

[10] Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabiʿ, *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

## A. The Reformist Islamist Perspective: Advocating a Civic State with an Islamic marja'iyya

Some moderate Islamist movements accept the civic state as a legitimate governance model, provided it accommodates Islamic principles. These groups attempt to harmonise Islam with democratic governance, rejecting theocratic rule while still advocating for Islamic values in legislation and public life. Their approach reflects a pragmatic adaptation to the realities of modern governance

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, particularly in its 2004 political vision and 2012 charter, presents a clear endorsement of the civic state concept.[11] Their vision for Syria's future is structured around the principles of a civic, democratic state, ensuring equal rights for all citizens, regardless of religion or ethnicity. Unlike Islamist groups that advocate for an Islamic state, the Brotherhood explicitly rejects theocratic governance, instead proposing a pluralistic system that allows for diverse political representation.

While the Brotherhood upholds sharia as a source of guidance, it does not advocate for its exclusive application as a legal system. Instead, their vision suggests a flexible integration of Islamic principles within a modern constitutional framework. This model closely aligns with the approach taken by Tunisia's Ennahda movement, which has similarly embraced the civic state framework while maintaining a commitment to Islamic values in public life. By framing their vision around justice, accountability, and governance in the public interest, the Syrian Brotherhood attempts to navigate the tensions between religious authority and modern state institutions.

In contrast, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has exhibited a more ambivalent stance toward the civic state concept. While its 2011 Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) platform formally endorsed democratic governance and civic institutions, its experience in power during 2012–2013 exposed deep tensions regarding the role of sharia in constitutional and legislative matters. The Brotherhood attempted to strike a balance between civic governance and Islamic legitimacy, yet this balancing act proved politically unstable.

The group's perceived majoritarian approach, particularly in constitutional drafting and legislative decisions, alienated secular and minority groups, fuelling political polarisation and ultimately contributing to its downfall. The Egyptian Brotherhood's experience underscores the pragmatism with which some Islamist movements approach the civic state concept while using it as a political tool rather than adhering to a fixed ideological position.

## B. The Rejectionist Islamist Perspective: Advocating an Islamic State

Unlike reformist Islamists who seek to integrate Islamic principles within a civic-state framework, rejectionist Islamist movements argue that sovereignty belongs solely to God rather than human institutions. They believe that any system that grants legislative authority to elected bodies, constitutional courts, or human lawmakers contradicts the fundamental Islamic principle that governance must be exclusively derived from divine revelation.

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11 Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, *The Political Project: The Vision of the Muslim Brotherhood for the Future of Syria*, 22 April 2004.

One of the most prominent groups in this camp is the Islamist organisation Hizb al-Tahrir, which categorically opposes the civic state, advocating instead for the re-establishment of an Islamic Caliphate.[12] Founded in 1953 by the Palestinian jurist and scholar Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani, Hizb al-Tahrir is active today in more than forty countries with strongholds in Central Asia, Indonesia, and parts of Europe.[13] According to its literature, the civic state is a Western-imposed framework designed to dilute Islamic governance and replace it with a system where laws are based on human reasoning rather than divine decree. Unlike Islamist movements that engage with democratic processes, Hizb al-Tahrir rejects electoral politics entirely, asserting that true Islamic rule can only be restored through the establishment of the Caliphate, which they believe can and should be achieved through *da'wa* activities, including non-violent mobilisation and outreach, rather than violent uprisings.

## C. The Jihadist Perspective: Rejecting the Civic State and the Modern State Entirely

Salafi-Jihadist groups, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, take their rejection of the civic state even further by denying the legitimacy of the modern nation-state altogether and seeking to dismantle it through violent means. Unlike other Islamist factions that seek to reform or influence state structures, these groups see all contemporary political systems as inherently illegitimate, believing that governance should be based solely on sharia without national borders, constitutional frameworks, or elected institutions. Consequently, they also reject the foundational principles of the civic state, particularly the notion of equal citizenship, since their vision of political order does not recognise legal equality among subjects regardless of religion, sect, or nationality.

For al-Qaeda, the civic state is a Western imperialist construct, imposed on Muslim societies to replace Islamic governance with secular institutions. Instead of engaging with the existing state system, al-Qaeda advocates for a return to governance based purely on sharia, rejecting national identities in favour of a broader Islamic *ummah* (community).

ISIS went even further, not only rejecting the nation-state model but actively seeking to dismantle it by creating a proto-caliphate. Unlike al-Qaeda, which has often functioned as a decentralised network, ISIS attempted to establish a territorial entity, implementing a strict and violent interpretation of sharia law while systematically working on eradicating modern civic institutions, including courts, bureaucratic apparatuses, and electoral systems.[14] Between 2014 and 2019, the group controlled extensive areas across northern Iraq and eastern Syria, proclaiming the establishment of an Islamic State with its de facto capital in Raqqa. At its peak, this self-declared caliphate governed millions of people, collecting taxes, managing oil fields, and enforcing its ideological and administrative model through coercion.

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12 Dietrich Jung and Kirstine Sinclair, "Religious Governmentality: The Case of Hizb ut-Tahrir," *Temenos* 56, no. 1 (2020): 95–117.

13 Ibid.

14 Federico Lorenzo Ramaioli, *Islamic State as a Legal Order: To Have No Law but Islam, Between Shari'a and Globalization* (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2022).

For these groups, the civic state is not simply inadequate; it is fundamentally incompatible with their vision of Islamic governance, which they see as a divinely mandated system that supersedes human-made laws. They actively combat any framework based on legislation derived from human sovereignty, reinforcing their uncompromising rejection of modern statehood and underscoring the central role of violence in their ideological project.

Finally, Islamist positions on the civic state are not static; they evolve in response to both internal ideological shifts and external political realities. The degree to which an Islamist movement accepts, modifies, or rejects the civic state depends not only on its doctrinal foundations but also on the historical circumstances and power dynamics it faces at any given moment. This fluidity is particularly evident in the case of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria, whose discourse and political behaviour reflect the interplay between ideological commitments and pragmatic adaptations to the conflict environment, as will be explained in the following analysis.

## III. HTS Governance and the Civic State: Rhetoric vs. Reality

By 2017, Jabhat al-Nusra had evolved into Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a broader coalition of Islamist factions. After serving as al-Qaeda's only official affiliate in Syria between early 2013 and mid-2016, Jabhat al-Nusra's rebranding and subsequent formation of HTS marked a significant departure from al-Qaeda's rigid ideological framework, as HTS positioned itself as a revolutionary authority in northern Syria rather than a mere jihadist movement.[15] HTS's governance model, particularly in Idlib and other liberated areas, demonstrated a concerted effort to balance its Islamist ideological commitments with pragmatic state-building strategies.[16]

Under the leadership of Abu Mohammad al-Jolani (Ahmed Hussein al-Shara), HTS gradually moved toward a more state-like approach, constructing a governance system that, while rooted in Islamic principles, adopted administrative structures characteristic of modern states.[17] One of the most significant developments in this transition was the establishment of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), a bureaucratic entity responsible for overseeing civil administration, public services, and regulatory affairs in HTS-controlled territories. The group also implemented judicial institutions based on modified sharia frameworks, allowing for a degree of legal standardisation while maintaining Islamic legitimacy. However, rather than adhering to a strict Salafi-Jihadist interpretation of Islamic law, HTS introduced a more flexible adjudication process, incorporating elements of customary law and local arbitration, which in turn helped mitigate resistance from local populations.[18]

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15 Azzam Al Kassir, "'Intentionality' in Radical Flank Effects: Reflections on Al-Nusra Front's Discourse of Moderation between 2012–2017," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 52, no. 4 (2024): 954–974.

16 Azzam Al Kassir, *Survival Strategies of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: The Trilogy of Administration, Militarism, and Discourse* (Doha: Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, 2023).

17 Jérôme Drevon and Patrick Haenni, "The Consolidation of a (PostJihadi) Technocratic Statelet in Idlib," *Project on Middle East Political Science* (POMEPS), November 2020.

18 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Hanging on in Idlib: Hayat Tahrir alSham's Expanding Tribal Engagement," *Policy Watch* No. 3499, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 11 June 2021.

Alongside these administrative and judicial mechanisms, HTS developed military and security structures resembling those of a de facto state, organising policing forces to maintain order and engaging in diplomatic negotiations with external actors, such as Turkey.[19] This approach, which contrasts with the more chaotic governance of ISIS, reflects HTS's pragmatic recalibration, which allowed it to govern and consolidate authority while preserving its Islamist identity.

An analysis of HTS's governance strategies in Idlib and other territories under its control offers a revealing case study of how an Islamist faction navigates governance in practice. While HTS positioned itself as a structured governing entity, adopting a discourse that separates civil and technocratic governance from religious and military functions, its actual approach reveals significant contradictions. On paper, HTS had no fundamental issue with the concept of a functional bureaucracy, independent institutions, or technocratic management, particularly in municipal governance, public services, and judicial affairs. However, in practice, HTS's governance remained highly centralised, with the real power concentrated in its military and security apparatus rather than in independent civil institutions. This centralisation of authority contradicts the very essence of a civic state, which relies on decentralisation, institutional autonomy, and the rule of law.

A key factor in this dynamic is HTS's use of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) as its administrative arm. While the SSG operated a bureaucratic structure, overseeing local councils, judicial bodies, and public services, decision-making power remained tightly controlled by HTS's leadership. The General Security Agency, HTS's intelligence and law enforcement body, played a crucial role in ensuring that no policy or administrative decision contradicted the group's ideological or security interests. Although HTS leaders, including Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, frequently contrasted their governance with the instability and fragmentation in Turkish-backed opposition areas,[20] this framing served more as a justification for HTS's centralisation of power than an indication of genuine civic governance. The group's rhetoric presented its model as structured, effective, and stable, but in reality, HTS merely replaced one form of authoritarian control with another.

## A. HTS and the Rhetoric of the Civic State

HTS's leadership had been particularly strategic in its use of civic-state language to consolidate power. In this context, such language refers primarily to the emphasis on civilian governance and the separation of military and religious authority from administrative affairs. Al-Jolani and other senior figures repeatedly argued that their model allows civil institutions to function independently from HTS's religious and security leadership. Leaders like Abu Maria al-Qahtani (d. 2024) also framed HTS as the only viable governing force in northern Syria, portraying rival opposition leaders as ineffective and incapable of providing stability.

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19 Christopher Solomon, "HTS: Evolution of a Jihadi Group," *Wilson Center*, 13 July 2022.

20 Amjaad Media Agency, *A Meeting with the Leaders of the Displaced Community about the Dangers of Rapprochement with the Regime, with Leader "Abu Muhammad alJawlani"*, 11 January 2023.

Yet, despite this rhetoric, HTS's governance remained anything but independent. The judiciary, while operating under a modified sharia framework, was not autonomous, as judicial decisions were subject to HTS's political priorities. Similarly, administrative councils, ostensibly responsible for local governance, were closely monitored by HTS's security structures, making them little more than administrative extensions of its rule. This overlap between civil, military, and religious institutions is what differentiates HTS from a civic state, where governance is based on institutional independence.

A major challenge to HTS's claim to legitimate governance under a civic-state framework is its highly centralised power structure. Although the SSG and affiliated councils provided a bureaucratic framework, the real decision-making power was concentrated in HTS's leadership, particularly within its religious and security networks. Unlike a civic state, which distributes authority across institutions and promotes checks and balances, HTS maintained a top-down governance model, where dissent was systematically controlled, and political pluralism was absent.[21]

This centralisation extends beyond political control into economic and financial affairs. HTS oversaw taxation, trade, and customs regulations, ensuring that financial resources remain within its ruling apparatus. In contrast to a civic state, where governance, including economic management, is subject to the rule of law, institutional oversight, and public accountability, HTS's economic operations were opaque and deeply intertwined with its military and security structures. This fusion of power reinforces its authoritarian order and highlights its divergence from the civic model, which presumes a unified legal and institutional framework to which all sectors of governance are held accountable.

While HTS successfully created the perception of stability, its governance remained fundamentally authoritarian rather than civic. This is because civic governance, by definition, requires accountable institutions, the rule of law, and a separation between military, religious, and civil authority. The contrast between HTS-controlled territories and the fragmented governance of opposition-held areas may make HTS appear as a more effective governing force, but this effectiveness was not built on institutional independence or democratic legitimacy. Instead, it was the result of a tightly controlled power structure that centralises authority under HTS's leadership.

The core question here is: Can HTS transition toward a more civic model of governance, or is its rhetoric simply a tool to justify its rule? While HTS's experience in Idlib demonstrated its pragmatic adaptability, incorporating administrative functions and state-like structures, it did not show a genuine commitment to power-sharing, decentralisation, or institutional autonomy. The persistence of authoritarian centralisation, security oversight over civil institutions, and ideological dominance over governance suggests that HTS may not be evolving toward a civic state but rather consolidating its own version of centralised Islamist rule with a bureaucratic facade.

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[21] Orwa Ajjoub, "HTS is not al-Qaeda, but it is still an authoritarian regime to be reckoned with," *Middle East Institute*, 24 June 2021.

In essence, HTS appears willing to actively engage in reforming governance and state-building, but it does so on its own terms, ensuring that power remains within a closed circle of authority.[22] This makes its governance incompatible with the principles of a civic state, where institutions operate independently of ruling factions, legal systems are subject to constitutional oversight, and power is distributed rather than monopolised. Whether HTS can break away from this pattern and embrace a more pluralistic, civic-oriented governance model seems unlikely, as its earlier survival as a ruling entity depended on maintaining control rather than ceding authority to an independent civil administration.

## B. HTS and the Prospects for a Civic State in Post-Assad Syria

The fall of the Assad regime has thrust Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and its leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, into the centre of Syria's political future, raising the critical question of whether a genuine civic state can emerge from the ashes of dictatorship. Publicly, al-Sharaa has embraced the language of civic governance, promising to protect minorities, foster national unity and equal citizenship, and build a state based on institutions and the rule of law.[23] However, this rhetoric stands in contrast to HTS's well-documented history of authoritarian rule in its Idlib proto-state.[24] The prospects for a civic state in Syria are therefore contingent on the immense challenge of reconciling the group's pragmatic words with its deeply entrenched, power-centric actions.

The willingness of HTS to embrace a truly civic model is questionable. As mentioned before, its engagement with concepts like institutional governance has historically been opportunistic, serving as a tool to build legitimacy and consolidate power rather than reflecting a core ideological commitment. The SSG in Idlib was a prime example of this strategy: a technocratic, civilian administration that functioned as a facade for a highly centralised structure where all strategic decisions remained in the hands of HTS's religious and military leadership. This pattern of monopolising power has been central to the group's survival and appears to be the template for its national-level governance.

Several profound challenges obstruct the path to a civic state in Syria. The first and most significant is HTS's own authoritarian nature. The top-down governance model it employed in Idlib, which suppressed political pluralism and dissent, is incompatible with the civic principles of institutional autonomy and the rule of law. Attempting to scale this model to a diverse, multi-sectarian nation is a recipe for conflict. Secondly, al-Sharaa faces the difficult task of maintaining internal cohesion. Any genuine move toward moderation and power-sharing risks alienating hardline factions and individuals within HTS, potentially provoking dissent that could force a retreat from civic promises to preserve unity and cohesion.

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22 Although the organisation was officially dissolved in early 2025, real power remained in the hands of a small circle of elite leaders and their close associates. See, for example: "Behind Al-Sharaa… Who Is Abdul Rahman Salameh?" *Enab Baladi*, 6 February 2025; and: Gulnar Al-Ali, "Maher Al-Sharaa Appointed Secretary-General of the Syrian Presidency… Justifications and Concerns," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 7 April 2025.

23 See for example: "During His Meeting with a Shiʿite Delegation, alSharaʿ Affirms the Principle of Citizenship to Ensure Equal Treatment for All," *Al Mayadeen Media*, 28 March 2025.

24 Ajjoub, "HTS is not al-Qaeda". See also: Amin Batal, "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham Continues Its Monopoly, Seizing the Construction and Tenders Sector," *Syria TV*, 11 February 2022.

Furthermore, the new transitional government that was formed on 29 March has so far failed the most basic test of statehood, that is the establishment of a monopoly on legitimate force. The current leadership's inability to prevent its own allied factions from carrying out sectarian revenge killings against Alawite civilians and members of the Druze community has shattered the trust of minority communities across Syria and undermined any claim to be a protector of all citizens.

Despite these grim prospects, a narrow path towards a more civic-oriented future is not impossible, though it depends on several critical conditions. The primary hope lies in HTS's proven pragmatism. The group's evolution from an al-Qaeda affiliate to a Syrian-focused, state-building project was driven by a calculated desire for legitimacy and long-term survival. This same pragmatism could, in theory, compel its leadership to conclude that a new authoritarianism is unsustainable and that genuine concessions are necessary for stability. Such a scenario would only occur under sustained pressure, both from a resilient and organised Syrian civic activism and from an international community that conditions diplomatic engagement on verifiable progress. Ultimately, the definitive test will be the current transitional leadership's willingness to meaningfully share power and implement the rule of law. This entails moving beyond symbolic minority appointments in the cabinet and other offices to empowering independent institutions, enabling genuine political pluralism and, crucially, placing the military and security apparatus under the rule of law while conducting serious investigations and trials into the atrocities committed against the Alawite and Druze communities. Without such a fundamental transformation, the promise of a civic state will remain little more than a political façade for a new, more sophisticated form of authoritarian rule.

## CONCLUSION

The political trajectory of the contemporary Arab world is defined by a profound and unresolved contest over the nature of the modern state. Positioned between the legacies of authoritarian secularism and the aspirations for theocratic rule, the concept of the "civic state" (*dawla madaniyya*) has emerged as a central, yet deeply ambiguous, battleground. Islamist movements are pivotal actors in this struggle, their positions spanning a spectrum from reformist attempts to reconcile Islamic principles with democratic norms to the violent rejection of any model not based exclusively on divine sovereignty.

The recent transition in Syria offers a stark, real-world illustration of this theoretical dilemma. The evolution of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham from a transnational jihadist franchise to a pragmatic, state-building entity demonstrates a remarkable capacity for political adaptation driven by the pursuit of power and legitimacy. Previously, HTS's leadership has publicly embraced the lexicon of the civic state, establishing a technocratic administration and engaging in regional diplomacy. However, this civic facade sems to mask a persistent authoritarian core, which is characterised by the centralisation of power, a neo-patrimonial economic model, and the suppression of political pluralism.

More recently, HTS's conduct in the immediate post-Assad period indicate a possible continuation of its pattern of instrumentalising the discourse and institutions of statehood to entrench its own dominance.

The Syrian case highlights a critical challenge for the region, namely the risk of illiberal actors instrumentalising the language of civic governance and the civic state to consolidate a new form of authoritarianism. The ultimate test for any post-revolutionary order is not merely its capacity to provide stability in the short run, but its willingness to genuinely share power, subordinate security to the rule of law, and foster an inclusive social contract. Without this fundamental transformation, the promise of a civic state remains a mirage, and the cycle of repression and conflict that has defined the region for decades is likely to endure.

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