

Hizb ut-Tahrir: Political Doctrine, Global Reach, and Challenge to the International Order

By: Arun Anand

Introduction

In the evolving landscape of global Islamism, Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT)—“The Party of Liberation”—poses a distinctive yet underrecognized challenge for U.S. national security. Although HT disavows violence, its ambition to establish a transnational, sharia-based caliphate presents an enduring strategic threat to the United States and the liberal international



order it upholds.¹ What distinguishes HT from jihadist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State—whose immediate operational threats are more visible and therefore more readily actionable—is its gradual, long-term revolutionary strategy rooted in ideological subversion, social mobilization, and eventual political capture.² Notwithstanding HT’s doctrinal rigidity, rejection of democracy, and capacity for subversion, its nonviolent posture—more tactical than ethical—has enabled it to navigate a wide spectrum of political systems, from tightly-controlled authoritarian regimes in Central Asia and the Middle East to liberal democracies in Western Europe, North America, and various diaspora communities.³

¹ Zeyno Baran, *Hizb ut-Tahrir: Islam’s Political Insurgency* (Washington, D.C.: The Nixon Center, 2004), hereafter cited as Baran, *Hizb ut Tahrir*; and Lorenzo Vidino, *The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West* (Columbia University Press, 2010), hereafter cited as Vidino, *New Muslim Brotherhood*.

² Suha Taji-Farouki, *A Fundamental Quest: Hizb al-Tahrir and the Search for the Islamic Caliphate* (Grey Seal, 1996), hereafter cited as Farouki, *Fundamental Quest*.

³ Emmanuel Karagiannis, “Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Radicalization of Central Asian Muslims,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 4 (2006): 317–331, hereafter cited as Karagiannis, “Hizb ut-Tahrir.”

The movement's "ideological insurgency" constitutes a form of cognitive warfare that the United States has struggled to recognize, let alone effectively counter. While HT avoids direct confrontation with Western militaries, it indirectly facilitates radicalization, delegitimizes allied Muslim-majority governments, and exploits civil liberties in democratic systems to achieve illiberal objectives. The movement's core mission is to propagate a narrative deeply hostile to U.S. values and geopolitical interests.⁴

This paper examines HT through the lens of U.S. foreign policy and counter-extremism strategy by dissecting its core ideology, operational methods, financial networks, and regional footholds. Particular attention is paid to HT's potential to destabilize U.S. allies, radicalize diaspora populations, and erode public confidence in democratic institutions. This paper reframes HT, moving beyond its characterization as a peripheral ideological actor to highlight its role as a transnational movement with substantial disruptive potential. As such, it calls for a more proactive and nuanced U.S. policy response that transcends conventional counterterrorism paradigms.

HT: Origins and Historical Evolution

Founded in 1953 in Jordanian-controlled Jerusalem, HT was the brainchild of Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani, a Palestinian Islamic jurist who had served as a sharia court judge under the British Mandate. Al-Nabhani's worldview was profoundly shaped by a sense of political disillusionment rooted in the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, the failure of Arab

regimes to prevent Palestinian displacement, and the broader collapse of Islamic political sovereignty following the 1924 dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate.⁵ For al-Nabhani, these developments exposed the fundamental shortcomings of secular Arab nationalism—chiefly its failure to unify the Muslim world—and the arbitrariness of the Western-imposed state system. In response, al-Nabhani called for reestablishing a unified Islamic caliphate, conceived as a

⁴ Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed., *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), hereafter cited as Wiktkorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*.

⁵ John Calvert, Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism (Columbia University Press, 2009).

counter-hegemonic alternative to the prevailing international order. The caliphate, in his view, possessed the moral and structural integrity to subvert and, ultimately, supplant the modern Western-oriented state system.⁶

HT's early political engagements mirrored contemporary Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood. Initially, the group participated in Jordan's restricted electoral process. However, HT's explicit call to dismantle existing Arab regimes and replace them with an Islamic polity provoked a swift response from the Jordanian state. Authorities curtailed the group's activities. This prompted HT to abandon overt political participation in favor of a clandestine and ideologically driven strategy focused on societal transformation and regime change.⁷

Central to HT's core operational framework is a three-stage strategy: (1) cultivating an ideologically committed cadre of elites; (2) expanding societal influence through targeted proselytization (*dawah*); and (3)

orchestrating a nonviolent transition to Islamic rule through mass mobilization and elite defection. Unlike jihadist movements, HT rejects armed struggle and instead advocates for systemic change through ideological infiltration and political subversion.⁸

Despite being overshadowed by more prominent Islamist organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East and Jamaat-e-Islami in South Asia, HT capitalized on the ideological fluidity that emerged amid late 20th-century geopolitical disruptions. The Islamic revivalism of the 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 created opportunities for the group to expand its influence in various regional arenas.⁹ In the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia—particularly Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—HT capitalized on widespread ideological discontent, directing it against authoritarian regimes that had failed to deliver socioeconomic improvements. Similarly, Indonesia's democratic transition following Suharto's fall enabled the movement to operate

⁶ Taji-Farouki, *Fundamental Quest*.

⁷ Baran, Hizb ut-Tahrir; and Vidino, *New Muslim Brotherhood*.

⁸ Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*.

⁹ Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (Columbia University Press, 2004), hereafter cited as Roy, *Globalized Islam*.

openly and expand its presence in Southeast Asia.¹⁰

At the same time, authoritarian repression in the Middle East forced many HT operatives into exile, inadvertently catalyzing the group's transnational diffusion. With its robust civil liberties and multicultural norms, Western Europe emerged as an unexpected incubator. In the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, and Denmark, HT established a strong organizational infrastructure and a sophisticated media apparatus that targeted second-generation Muslim youth. By confronting identity crises and sociopolitical marginalization, HT positioned itself as a purveyor of ideological resistance to both Western liberalism and authoritarian regimes in Muslim-majority states.¹¹ The group's European branches functioned as ideological laboratories, refining the movement's messaging and amplifying its transnational appeal, all while operating within the legal confines of liberal democracies.

Over the decades, HT evolved from a marginal oppositional movement into a transnational Islamist network marked by ideological consistency and global reach. Its influence did not stem from territorial control or direct political power but from its capacity to project a coherent alternative to existing governance models.¹² For policymakers, HT presented a unique challenge: a nonviolent yet ideologically radical actor that operated within legal parameters while seeking to undermine the foundations of the secular state system.

HT's Ideological Framework: Reconstructing the *Ummah*

HT articulates a highly systematized and ideologically rigid alternative to the secular modern nation-state, grounded in principles of divine sovereignty (*ḥakimiyyah*), legal absolutism, and political monism. Its ideology rejects both the normative foundations of the contemporary international order and the legitimacy of secular governance in Muslim-majority states. HT's doctrinal rigidity

¹⁰ Greg Fealy, "Hizbut Tahrir in Indonesia: Seeking a 'Total' Islamic Identity," in *Islamic Movements: Politics and Social Reform in Indonesia*, eds. Greg Fealy and Sally White (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), 151–178.

¹¹ Taji-Farouki, *Fundamental Quest*.

¹² Vidino, *New Muslim Brotherhood*.

is at odds with dominant global norms, including Islamist movements that accommodate pluralism or political participation. However, the group's clarity of vision and ideological consistency resonate deeply with segments of the population in Muslim-majority nations disillusioned with authoritarian rule and the moral bankruptcy of Western liberal modernity.¹³

Central to HT's doctrine is the categorical rejection of two interlinked phenomena: 1) the philosophical underpinnings and institutional architecture of Western secularism; and 2) the postcolonial division of the Muslim *ummah* into sovereign nation-states governed by "non-Islamic" legal systems. This dual rejection constitutes the ideological core of the movement and serves as a *raison d'être* for its call to re-establish a transnational Islamic caliphate.¹⁴ From HT's perspective, the contemporary global order, characterized by secular modernity, capitalist economics, and the Westphalian model of statehood, functions as a structural mechanism to

politically subjugate and divide Muslims.

As such, HT conceptualizes global politics through a Manichean binary that frames the world as dominated by a conflict between truth (*ḥaqq*) and falsehood (*baṭil*). This dualistic framework informs its antagonism toward both Western liberal democracies and Muslim-majority regimes that have adopted secular nationalism or hybrid legal systems. For HT, any government, especially a Muslim one, that does not enforce sharia law is illegitimate and deviant, warranting its overthrow. Ultimately, the movement seeks to replace all governments with a single Islamic polity ruled solely by sharia law.¹⁵

In pursuit of this objective, HT's founder al-Nabhani developed a draft constitution (*muṣawwada dustur*) outlining the movement's vision for a caliphate. Conceived as a unitary centralized state, this polity explicitly rejects democratic representation, pluralism, and federalism, regarding them as

¹³ Baran, Hizb ut-Tahrir; and Wiktorowicz, Radical Islam Rising.

¹⁴ Greg Fealy, "Islamism and the Political Order in the Middle East: The Case of Hizb ut-Tahrir," *The Middle East Journal* 61, no. 4 (2007): 653–670.

¹⁵ Meerim Aitkulova, "Hizb ut-Tahrir: Dreaming of Caliphate," in *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements* (Brill, 2021), 402–420, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv1v7zbv8.24>.

incompatible with Islamic governance. Additionally, it demands abstention from participation in secular international institutions, such as the United Nations, and insists on severing diplomatic relations with states it deems imperialist or morally corrupt—most notably, the United States and the United Kingdom.¹⁶

For these reasons, HT represents a nonviolent but deeply subversive challenge to the secular state system. Its capacity to rally disaffected populations behind a cohesive transnational agenda makes it a durable ideological threat, with lasting implications for politically fragile or transitional settings.

HT: Methods and Mobilization Strategy

Historically, HT has pursued a structured three-stage revolutionary plan explicitly modeled on the Prophet Muhammad's early polity in Medina. For the movement, this historical precedent is symbolic and functions as a normative blueprint for political mobilization and the founding of an

Islamic caliphate.¹⁷ This tripartite strategy—outlined in HT's internal doctrinal literature and public communications—consists of ideological cultivation (*tarbiyah*), societal Islamization (*tathqif al-mujtama*), and the assumption of governance (*istilam al-hukm*). Each stage involves a deliberate, incremental effort to infiltrate societal structures and delegitimize incumbent political regimes.¹⁸

In the first phase, the movement focuses on cultivating a committed ideological vanguard through rigorous indoctrination. This cadre-building process targets university students, professionals, and disaffected youth recruited into closed study circles. Once integrated, the recruits undergo systematic training to internalize HT's theological and political worldview. Selection is based on intellectual compatibility but also on psychological discipline and demonstrated loyalty to the movement's long-term objectives.¹⁹ In the second phase, the movement seeks to reshape public consciousness by fostering dissent

¹⁶ Taji-Farouki, *Fundamental Quest*.

¹⁷ Baran, *Hizb ut-Tahrir*.

¹⁸ Taji-Farouki, *Fundamental Quest*.

¹⁹ Taji-Farouki, *Fundamental Quest*.

against prevailing political and ideological norms. Its advocacy of Islamic values amounts to an intellectual insurgency centered on the belief that Islamic governance represents a superior form of rule. Through a sustained and relentless intellectual campaign, HT spreads ideas that challenge the legitimacy of secular and nationalist regimes.²⁰

The third and final phase calls for the movement's transition from ideological contestation to political ascendancy. Rather than pursuing a violent seizure of power, HT advocates a nonviolent and systemic takeover that exploits the erosion of regime legitimacy and co-opts key elements within state institution, particularly members of the military and judiciary.²¹ While not conceived as a coup *per se*, this phase seeks regime displacement through elite defection and institutional subversion, eventually culminating in the creation of a sharia-based caliphate.

Despite formally renouncing armed violence, HT straddles an ambiguous

line between nonviolent activism and militant ideology. The organization openly glorifies jihad as a military and political obligation of the Islamic state and envisions territorial expansion through military means following the caliphate's establishment. Although HT prohibits its members from engaging in unsanctioned violence, its doctrinal stance on the use of force remains deeply problematic. As such, it fosters a radical ideological ecosystem that can serve as a gateway to further extremist mobilization.²²

Counterterrorism and intelligence agencies across multiple jurisdictions have scrutinized HT because of its ambiguous perspective toward violence. While HT is not directly implicated in terrorism, its rigid ideological principles and rejection of pluralistic governance exhibit a significant convergence with militant Salafi-jihadist narratives. Analysts have argued that HT's absolutist ideology, delegitimization of democratic institutions, and framing of global politics in civilizational binaries carry

²⁰ Baran, *Hizb ut-Tahrir*; and Emmanuel Karagiannis, "Political Islam in Central Asia: The Role of Hizb al-Tahrir," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 2 (2010): 13–15.

²¹ Emmanuel Karagiannis and Clark McCauley, "Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami: Evaluating the Threat Posed by a Radical Islamic Group That Remains Nonviolent," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 3 (2006): 315–334, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550600570168>, hereafter cited as Karagiannis and McCauley, "Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami."

²² Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*.

serious consequences. Together, these elements create a fertile intellectual environment that can facilitate the radicalization and recruitment of members into violent extremist organizations.²³

In summary, HT operates as a non-kinetic yet ideologically radical actor that challenges the normative underpinnings of the secular international order. Its presence in fragile political environments and liberal democracies alike necessitates a calibrated policy response that balances legal constraints with proactive counter-radicalization strategies.²⁴

HT's Leadership and Organizational Discipline

HT's leadership structure and organizational setup reflect a deliberate strategy to maintain ideological purity and centralized authority even as the movement's operational footprint extends across multiple countries. Since al-Nabhani founded the group in 1953, it has consistently maintained a hierarchically rigid and doctrinally

insulated leadership model. Upon al-Nabhani's death in 1977, HT's leadership transitioned to Abdul Qadeem Zallum—a senior ideologue and close confidant of al-Nabhani within the party's inner circle—who continued to uphold the movement's fundamentalist orientation. Under Zallum's tenure, HT expanded its presence internationally, especially across Central Asia and Europe, while avoiding significant ideological dilution.²⁵

In 2003, Ata Abu Rashta, a Palestinian engineer and former HT spokesperson in Jordan, assumed the movement's leadership following Zallum's resignation and death. Abu Rashta's tenure marked a subtle but notable strategic recalibration. Under his leadership, HT adopted an increasingly confrontational rhetoric, particularly in response to Western military interventions in the Muslim world, such as the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.²⁶ Abu Rashta's public statements regularly denounced Western hegemony, secular governance models, and Arab regimes aligned with the

²³ Karagiannis and McCauley, "Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami."

²⁴ Baran, Hizb ut-Tahrir; and Vidino, New Muslim Brotherhood.

²⁵ Karagiannis, "Hizb ut-Tahrir."

²⁶ Baran, Hizb ut-Tahrir; Vidino, New Muslim Brotherhood.

United States. Consequently, his rhetoric reinforced the movement's positioning as a radical yet disciplined voice of Islamist resistance.

HT's core governance is concentrated in the General Leadership Council (*al-Qiyadah al-Ammah*)—often informally referred to as *Qiedat*. This senior body exercises near-total control over the movement's ideological doctrine, strategic direction, and international operations. Composed of a small cadre of ideologically vetted elites, primarily from HT's base territories (Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon), the Council ensures strict doctrinal conformity to al-Nabhani's original formulations.²⁷

While HT's operational presence extends to over 50 countries, its national and regional chapters function in a subordinate capacity, with limited discretion over local operations, media outreach, and logistical coordination. Accordingly, their activities are strictly regulated by HT's methodological blueprint (*manhaj*), which imposes rigorous conduct standards. Any deviation from the prescribed ideological and procedural norms is met with internal disciplinary

measures, including expulsion or public disavowal. This high degree of internal control stands in sharp contrast to other Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood or Jamaat-e-Islami, which have struggled with factionalism, ideological revisionism, and localized pragmatism.²⁸

HT's capacity for institutional endurance is one of its most distinctive attributes. Despite facing severe external repression in several countries and the challenges posed by global dispersion, the movement has demonstrated a remarkable ability to maintain structural cohesion and prevent internal schisms. As noted by Emmanuel Karagiannis, HT's resilience can be attributed to its unwavering commitment to doctrinal uniformity, centralized leadership, and the rejection of both local electoral participation and localized armed jihad—factors that have shielded it from internal fragmentation and external manipulation.²⁹

Moreover, HT's internal culture is marked by a disciplined, quasi-clerical ethos that values ideological rigidity and organizational cohesion.

²⁷ Taji-Farouki, *Fundamental Quest*.

²⁸ Roy, *Globalized Islam*.

²⁹ Karagiannis, "Political Islam in Central Asia."

Recruitment into the movement is highly selective, privileging individuals who demonstrate intellectual receptivity, operational discretion, and an unwavering commitment to HT's transnational Islamist worldview. The movement deliberately cultivates a cadre-based structure in which allegiance to transnational Islamism takes precedence over national, ethnic, or local allegiances. Prospective members undergo an intensive vetting and indoctrination process in covert study circles where they are systematically socialized into HT's theological and political worldview. In addition to serving as platforms for ideological education, these circles operate as mechanisms for surveillance, behavioral conformity, and elite formation.³⁰

HT's recruitment model has helped the movement to develop a tightly controlled, ideologically homogeneous vanguard capable of advancing its objectives in a coordinated and disciplined manner even within hostile political environments. By maintaining a high threshold for entry and a centralized indoctrination process, HT

insulates itself from ideological dilution, factionalism, and external co-optation—vulnerabilities that commonly afflict other transnational Islamist groups. Its internal training emphasizes not only theological orthodoxy but also intellectual discipline and strict deference to hierarchy.³¹ Unsurprisingly, this tightly controlled internal culture poses significant challenges for law enforcement agencies attempting to counter the group across multiple countries.

HT's Support Base and Membership

HT's global membership estimates vary widely, ranging from tens of thousands to over a million. This variation reflects the movement's hybrid organizational structure, allowing it to oscillate between covert operations in authoritarian regimes and quasi-public advocacy in liberal democracies.³² For all its HT variability, HT display a consistent pattern: the movement's ideological narrative strongly resonates with urban and educated Muslim youth who feel politically disenfranchised, socioeconomically marginalized, and

³⁰ Baran, *Hizb ut-Tahrir*; and Vidino, *New Muslim Brotherhood*.

³¹ Roy, *Globalized Islam*.

³² Taji-Farouki, *Fundamental Quest*.

morally alienated from both the secular autocracies of the Muslim world and Western liberal democracies.

Nowhere is this dynamic more pronounced than in Central Asia where endemic corruption, economic precarity, and authoritarian governance have fostered an ideological vacuum.³³ In this context, HT's narrative—rooted in divine justice, Islamic unity, and moral assurance—has gained significant momentum. By framing itself as a nonviolent and spiritually grounded alternative to both radical militancy and secular autocracy, HT appeals to segments of the population disillusioned with existing political structures. As Didier Chaudet notes, the movement powerfully appeals to individuals grappling with what Charles Taylor termed the “malaise of modernity,” offering a framework for existential meaning, political agency, and collective purpose.³⁴

Organizationally, HT operates along geopolitical fault lines. In proscribed environments, such as Uzbekistan, Egypt, and Bangladesh, it relies on clandestine study circles for ideological indoctrination. This structure allows it to evade state surveillance while ensuring internal cohesion. Conversely, in liberal jurisdictions, like the United Kingdom, the movement engages in public-facing political activism. Taking advantage of civil liberties, it organizes conferences, media outreach, and community mobilization to advance an illiberal Islamist agenda.³⁵

What is more instructive is that HT's operational duality extends beyond structure to encompass narrative adaptability. The movement's capacity to reframe ideological principles in ways that align with local political discourse has proven indispensable to its global spread. In Western diaspora contexts, HT articulates its ideology through locally resonant frames by positioning itself as a bulwark against Islamophobia, cultural assimilation,

³³ Mahesh Ranjan Debata, “Hizb ut-Tahrir: The Destabilising Force in Central Asia,” in *Religion and Security in South and Central Asia*, ed. K. Warikoo (Routledge, 2011), 124–138, hereafter cited as Debata, “Hizb ut-Tahrir: The Destabilising Force.”

³⁴ Didier Chaudet, “Hizb ut-Tahrir: An Islamist Threat to Central Asia?” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2006): 113–125, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602000600738822>; and Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (House of Anansi Press, 1991).

³⁵ Baran, Hizb ut-Tahrir.

and geopolitical injustices, such as the war on terror and the alleged Israeli occupation of Palestine. In these settings, the caliphate is framed not merely as a political project but as a therapeutic vision for the recovery of identity.³⁶

HT's moral absolutism, rejection of elections, and strict ideology have made it attractive to individuals dissatisfied with the perceived compromises of organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami. These rival movements are often regarded as politically diluted or theologically inconsistent. In response, HT projects itself as the vanguard of a "pure" Islamic order that claims to restore political agency to the *Ummah*. As such, it challenges both secular state systems and pluralistic political norms, regarding them as key contributors to the Muslim world's current state of affairs.

HT's Funding Sources

Unlike many Islamist movements whose funding sources are traceable to state sponsors or transnational extremist networks, HT maintains a largely opaque funding system.³⁷ This lack of transparency aligns with the group's clandestine operating model—especially in authoritarian environments—and its publicly nonviolent stance, making it historically a lower-priority target for financial intelligence agencies. Nevertheless, available assessments suggest that HT sustains itself through a decentralized, ideologically driven self-financing model. Consistent with its microcell organizational structure, this model encourages members to pledge a portion of their income to fund the movement's activities.³⁸

One of the defining features of HT's funding ethos is its principled rejection of state patronage. Given the group's foundational opposition to the modern nation-state—and its denunciation of Muslim-majority governments as

³⁶ Ayoo Mohammed, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World* (University of Michigan Press, 2008).

³⁷ International Crisis Group, "Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir," *ICG Asia Report* no. 58, June 2003, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/uzbekistan/radical-islam-central-asia-responding-hizb-ut-tahrir>, hereafter cited as International Crisis Group, "Radical Islam in Central Asia."

³⁸ Debata, "Hizb ut-Tahrir: The Destabilising Force."

apostate and complicit with Western interests—its acceptance of state funds would be doctrinally inconsistent. However, HT's commitment to political purity and autonomy comes at a cost: it significantly limits the group's access to macro-level funding sources. These sources are reportedly linked to wealthy Gulf states, implicated as the main sponsors of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Salafi Islamist groups.³⁹ Nonetheless, HT's stance reinforces its credibility among followers seeking an untainted and self-reliant Islamic alternative.

Western assessments, including those by the International Crisis Group (2003), have found no verifiable links between HT and the established infrastructure of jihadist financing.⁴⁰ Unlike groups like Al-Qaeda or Hezbollah—which leverage illicit trade, money laundering, and state support—HT operates largely outside these financial ecosystems. The group's financial autonomy has allowed it to exercise plausible deniability, avoid designation as a terrorist entity in many

jurisdictions, including the United States, and evade the financial sanctions typically imposed on violent extremist organizations.

HT claims its financial sustainability stems from internal resource mobilization, including voluntary member contributions, proceeds from the sale of ideological literature, and religious donations like *Zakat*.⁴¹ These income streams, cloaked in religious legitimacy, encourage grassroots financial participation while allowing the group to evade regulatory oversight. Like with other evangelical groups, allegations have surfaced—particularly in Central Asia—that HT provides monetary compensation for disseminating propaganda. Although these claims remain unverified, they reflect broader state anxieties about HT's expanding ideological reach.

One disconcerting aspect of HT's funding, highlighted by analysts such as Zeyno Baran,⁴² is the informal financial support it receives from diaspora professionals, such as engineers, doctors, and entrepreneurs. These contributions are often funneled

³⁹ Roy, *Globalized Islam*.

⁴⁰ International Crisis Group, "Radical Islam in Central Asia."

⁴¹ Debata, "Hizb ut-Tahrir: The Destabilising Force," 124–138.

⁴² Baran, *Hizb ut-Tahrir*.

through unregulated trust networks such as *hawala*, enabling the movement to finance its activities. Remarkably, despite touting some of the world's most advanced financial intelligence capabilities, Western governments have failed to subject these informal channels of patronage to meaningful scrutiny.

HT's Transnational Reach and Adaptation

HT's global diffusion highlights its capacity for ideological resilience, strategic adaptability, and transregional maneuverability. Since its inception in Jordan, the movement has greatly expanded across diverse political and cultural environments. By adapting to local conditions, it has leveraged its decentralized cell-based structure and doctrinal uniformity to maintain operational continuity and coherence.⁴³

Although HT originated in the Arab world, its influence across the Middle East and North Africa remains limited. Repressive measures by authoritarian regimes and ideological rivals have constrained its activities. In Jordan,

Syria, and Egypt, the movement is banned and subjected to persistent surveillance and crackdowns. Meanwhile, in Tunisia, Libya, and Algeria, the group's rejection of democracy and nationalism has provoked state opposition. Additionally, HT's aversion to armed activity—especially in Palestine—has undermined its legitimacy in a region where militarized jihad often commands popular support.⁴⁴

Paradoxically, the movement has found fertile ground in the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia. The collapse of socialism left an ideological void that successor regimes failed to fill. Compounding this, widespread corruption and authoritarian rule demoralized the population. Against this background, HT's call for a transnational caliphate resonated deeply with disaffected and disenfranchised communities. In Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, the movement attracted followers frustrated by socioeconomic decline and political marginalization. Brutal state repression—especially in

⁴³ Karagiannis, "Hizb ut-Tahrir."

⁴⁴ Meerim Aitkulova, "Hizb ut-Tahrir: Dreaming of Caliphate," in *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements* (Brill, 2021), 402–420, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv1v7zbv8.24>.

Uzbekistan—further bolstered HT’s appeal.⁴⁵

In South Asia, HT cultivated elite networks to infiltrate key institutions, so as to compensate for its lack of mass support. In Bangladesh, the movement was formally banned in 2009, following allegations of its role in a failed coup against Sheikh Hasina’s government. Despite the ban, HT continued to operate underground, particularly among educated, urban middle-class professionals and students disillusioned with both Islamist populism and secular-nationalist governance. Following Sheikh Hasina’s ouster in August 2024, Islamists like HT found the new political reality empowering. The shift enabled them to emerge from the shadows and reshape Bangladesh’s political future. Likewise, in Pakistan, HT’s inroads into the military intelligence establishment raised alarm, with several senior officers arrested in recent years for suspected links to the group.⁴⁶ These developments underscore HT’s strategic focus on

seizing influence within key state institutions as a pathway to change.

The movement also boasts a significant presence across Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, HT adeptly exploited the post-Suharto democratic transition to carve out a new political space.⁴⁷ Paradoxically, despite shunning electoral politics, HT shaped Indonesia’s Islamist landscape by offering a purist alternative to mainstream parties. Its rhetoric of moral clarity and political totalism appealed to citizens disillusioned with corruption and the shortcomings of democratic rule.

In liberal democracies, like the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, HT is able to operate with considerable freedom by exploiting the protections afforded by Western democracy—particularly freedom of expression and assembly. In this context, the group’s messaging often centers on identity politics, intellectual critiques of Western liberalism, and anti-imperialist narratives. These appeals are primarily directed at diasporic Muslim

⁴⁵ International Crisis Group, “Radical Islam in Central Asia”; and Karagiannis, “Hizb ut-Tahrir.”

⁴⁶ Pakistan Jails Brig Ali Khan and Four Other Officers,” *BBC News*, Aug. 3, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-19116499>.

⁴⁷ Raneeta Mutiara, “The Challenge from Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia,” *RSIS Commentaries* no. 31 (March 2023), <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/the-challenge-from-hizbut-tahrir-indonesia>.

populations grappling with issues such as integration, Islamophobia, and discontent over Western foreign policy toward the Muslim world.

However, HT's tactical openness has recently drawn increased scrutiny. In January 2024, the United Kingdom in a landmark ruling, formally proscribed HT under its counterterrorism legislation.⁴⁸ The decision followed HT's public statements celebrating Hamas's October 7, 2023, attacks on Israeli civilians, a development that catalyzed bipartisan consensus on the group's threat to public order and democratic values.

In January 2025, a similar controversy unfolded in Canada when HT announced plans to host its annual conference in Mississauga, Ontario, under the theme "The Khilafah (Caliphate): Eliminating the Obstacles That Are Delaying Its Return." The conference's promotional materials, disseminated via social media, featured provocative rhetoric, urging attendees

to explore strategies to confront the global power of the United States and Europe. One video, for instance, posed pointed questions like "[Is the U.S.] so powerful that our *Ummah* can't defeat it?" However, public outcry prompted the Canadian government to revoke permission for the event, highlighting its growing sensitivity to HT's mobilization efforts.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, HT continues to operate freely in Canada, and the government has thus far deflected calls for its proscription. Despite the group's role in radicalizing the sociopolitical landscape, the lack of direct evidence linking HT to violence—either in Canada or abroad—has been a key factor in the government's reluctance to ban the organization.

Significantly, HT also maintains a strong presence in the United States. It regularly organizes annual conferences, the most recent one held on March 2, 2024, in Villa Park, Illinois.⁵⁰ Despite explicitly rejecting Western political norms and calling for a global Islamic caliphate, HT remains legal under U.S.

⁴⁸ James Cleverly, "Home Secretary Declares Hizb ut-Tahrir as Terrorists," *GOV.UK*, Jan. 15, 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-declares-hizb-ut-tahrir-as-terrorists>.

⁴⁹ India Today, "Terror Group Hizb-ut-Tahrir Announces Khilafah Conference in Canada," Jan. 8, 2025, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/canada-news/story/terror-group-hizb-ut-tahrir-announces-khilafah-conference-in-canada-2661269-2025-01-08>.

⁵⁰ [50](#). Anti-Defamation League (ADL), "Hizb ut-Tahrir U.S. Conference Features Antisemitism, Calls for Violent Destruction of Israel," ADL, April 13, 2024, <https://www.adl.org/resources/article/hizb-ut-tahrir-us-conference-features-antisemitism-calls-violent-destruction>.

law. The permissive regulatory climate of the United States raises critical questions about the consistency and efficacy of its counter-extremism frameworks and the risks inherent in allowing an ideologically purist, anti-system movement to operate unimpeded within its borders. Such tolerance risks destabilizing the social order and inadvertently fueling insecurity. Importantly, it illustrates how HT has skilfully leveraged Western liberal values to propagate its illiberal agenda with relative ease.

Conclusion: HT's Ideological Permanence and Strategic Implications for the United States

HT stands as one of the most ideologically coherent, organizationally disciplined, and transnationally adaptive Islamist movements to endure in the post-Cold War Islamist landscape. Anchored in a vision of re-establishing a transnational caliphate, the group's political project calls for dismantling the Westphalian nation-state system, nullifying secular constitutions, and creating a unified Islamic polity governed by sharia. While this objective may appear archaic or utopian to some, dismissing or underestimating HT's unwavering commitment to it would be a mistake. The group's vision resonates strongly

in contexts characterized by political repression, foreign intervention, and the perceived failures of both secular-nationalist and Islamist-populist regimes.

Notwithstanding its official commitment to non-violence, HT poses a systemic ideological challenge to the international rule-based order. The movement categorically rejects liberal democracy, pluralism, and secular governance, positioning itself as a civilizational adversary to Western political values and the foundational principles of the modern Western liberal state. Instead, HT advocates for the establishment of a sharia-based transnational Islamic caliphate. To this end, HT targets structural fissures in Muslim-majority societies, such as authoritarianism, corruption, and economic inequality, to its advantage. In liberal democracies, it exploits freedom of speech and assembly to propagate an anti-system agenda. As both chief patron and principal enforcer of the global order, the United States features prominently in HT's rhetoric, frequently depicted as a crusading hegemon opposing the Muslim *Ummah's* efforts to restore the Islamic order.

Nevertheless, HT poses a unique dilemma for U.S. national security and

foreign policy. Its continued legal status in the United States enables it to organize public events and maintain active digital outreach. This situation raises critical questions about the legal boundaries of protected political expression and the threshold for ideological proscription. The United Kingdom has taken a decisive step by formally banning HT, and Canada recently prohibited one of its major public gatherings. By contrast, the United States has yet to implement comparable measures, despite HT's overt advocacy for dismantling the liberal order and replacing it with a transnational theocracy.

HT's explicit renunciation of violence makes it difficult for authorities to proscribe it as a terrorist organization. Nevertheless, it plays a critical role in fostering an ideological ecosystem that substantially overlaps with that of violent extremist movements. By facilitating an individual's transition from political dissidence to militant activism, HT serves as a catalyst for further radicalization. Specifically, the movement offers a theological justification for rejecting democratic systems, delegitimizing Muslim regimes allied with the West, and glorifying jihad.

Countering HT, therefore, requires more than traditional counterterrorism frameworks. Unlike jihadist networks that provoke a rapid military response through kinetic violence, the movement operates within legal gray zones. It skilfully leverages democratic protections, such as freedom of speech and association, to disseminate its anti-liberal and anti-Western ideology. Repression or outright bans risk driving the group underground, potentially deepening its conspiratorial worldview and heightening its mystique among the disillusioned. For this reason, a multidimensional counterstrategy is required. This strategy should pair targeted legal oversight with strategic counter-narratives that highlight pluralist Islamic scholarship and bolster civil society actors opposing ideological monopolization.

U.S. foreign policy makers should also confront the contradictions that HT exploits. The gap between U.S. rhetoric promoting democracy and its ongoing support for authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world is a key example. HT leverages issues like the U.S. backing of authoritarian allies, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the global war on terror as discursive entry points to construct a totalizing narrative of Western hostility and Islamic revival.

Even though HT has not realized its caliphal objective, its longevity, ideological coherence, and global footprint attest to its evolution as an adaptable ideological force. It is far from a short-lived revolutionary phenomenon. The core challenge for the United States and its allies is not simply to manage HT as a discrete security concern. It also requires confronting a civilizational counter-narrative that capitalizes on legitimate grievances, weaponizes political theology, and aspires to reshape the international order through a

fundamentally theocratic lens. In the broader contest between liberal democratic modernity and Islamist utopianism, HT's enduring relevance underscores the imperative of addressing not only the visible manifestations of extremism but also the deeper ideological currents that sustain them. To be effective, the United States must go beyond reactive counterterrorism and take proactive steps to confront the ideological roots of radicalization.

Arun Anand is a columnist, author, and broadcaster who specializes in issues related to Islamic radicalization. He has written extensively on the subject and is the author of books on the Taliban and radicalization in India. Over the past three decades, he has held senior editorial roles in leading Indian media organizations.