



Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria's New Leader: From Jihadist to Statesman? Aviv Oreg

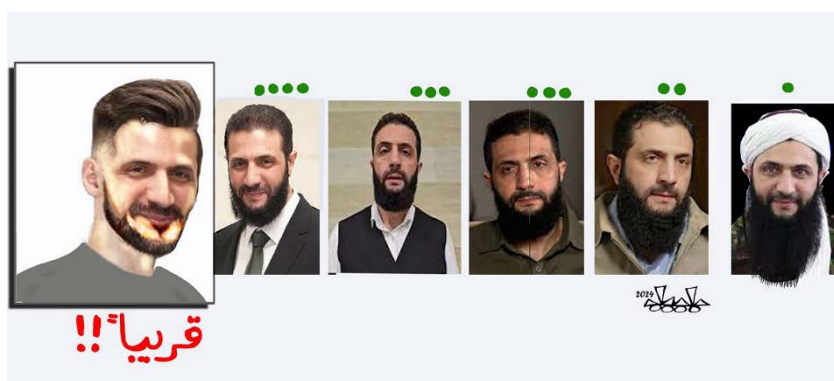
January 2, 2025

Overview¹

- ▶ On December 8, 2024, rebels led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa, aka Abu Muhammad al-Julani, captured Damascus and overthrew the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad after a 12-day military campaign, and al-Sharaa became the de facto ruler of Syria.²
- ▶ Ahmed al-Sharaa's ideology changed throughout his life, transforming him from a youth raised in an upper-middle class family in Syria to a jihadist activist in the ranks of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq, and eventually to one of the prominent leaders of the rebellion against the Assad regime in Syria. The transformations were reflected in his positions regarding the concept of jihad, his public disassociation from al-Qaeda and ISIS, and changes in his attire and image both in Syria and toward the international community.
- ▶ This study deals with al-Sharaa, his life, the events that influenced him, and his beliefs and ideology as they evolved over more than two decades of activity within Salafi-jihadi movements and the struggle against the Syrian regime.
- ▶ **In ITIC assessment, the ambivalence in al-Sharaa's positions and the changes in his conduct over the years were intended to ensure the survival of his organization but also indicated his ideological flexibility and political pragmatism. He is likely to continue presenting himself as a pragmatic figure to secure popular and international support for his emerging rule. However, it remains to be seen whether the ideological positions he developed as a Salafi-jihadi leader will be manifested in his role as the political leader of Syria, including his previously expressed aspiration to lead jihad to "liberate al-Aqsa."**

¹ Click <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en> to subscribe and receive the ITIC's daily updates as well as its other publications.

² For the sake of consistency, he will be referred to as al-Sharaa even during times he was using the nom de guerre of Abu Muhammad al-Julani.



Right to left, the transformation in al-Sharaa's image over the years
(al-Medan, December 22, 2024)

Family Background

- ▶ Ahmed al-Sharaa was born and raised in a secular Sunni family which emphasized education and political involvement, originally from the Fiq district in the Syrian Golan. One of the most prominent family members was Farouk al-Sharaa, Ahmed's father's cousin, who served as Syria's foreign minister under Presidents Hafez and Bashar al-Assad from 1984 to 2006 and later served as Bashar al-Assad's deputy for eight years (al-Baladinet, July 28, 2016; al-Watan, July 30, 2016).
- ▶ Ahmed's father participated in the socialist leftist ideologies and Arab nationalism that dominated the Arab world in the 1960s, led by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Ba'ath Party in Iraq. However, he opposed the Syrian Ba'athist interpretation of the ideology, protested Ba'athist rule and was imprisoned, escaping to Jordan, where he was also arrested. He was exiled to Iraq, where he studied economics and political science, specializing in petroleum.
- ▶ In 1967, while Ahmed's father was studying in Iraq, the Six-Day War broke out, the Golan Heights was captured by Israel and Ahmed's grandfather's family left their home in the Golan. Ahmed's father moved to Jordan to join the Palestinian fedayeen but soon returned to Iraq to complete his studies. In 1971, he returned to Syria but was imprisoned again for opposing the regime. Upon his release he made a failed bid to run for parliament. Consequently, he moved to Saudi Arabia and worked in the Ministry of Oil for ten years (PBS, June 1, 2021).
- ▶ **Ahmed al-Sharaa was born in Riyadh in 1982.** When he was seven the family returned to Syria and settled in the al-Mazzeah neighborhood of Damascus, where Ahmed's father served as an advisor to Syria's Minister of Oil. Later, following professional disagreements in the

Syrian oil ministry, Ahmed's father left his position and turned to the real estate business. The family's livelihood depended mainly on a grocery store in Damascus owned by Ahmed's father and uncle (INSS, December 24, 2024). Ahmed's mother worked as a geography teacher at a girls' middle school (Syria TV, December 24, 2023).

► Ahmed al-Sharaa attended the neighborhood high school and was described by his classmates as a diligent, intelligent, handsome student, though introverted and somewhat shy (Syria TV, December 24, 2023). At times, he also contributed to the family's livelihood by working in the grocery store (INSS, December 24, 2024).



Ahmed al-Sharaa as a child and young man (Daraj media, December 26, 2024)

Religious Radicalization

► Ahmed al-Sharaa's entry into Salafi-jihadi organizations conforms to the stages of Islamic radicalization identified among young people, particularly from Western countries, who joined global jihad:³

- ◆ **Pre-radicalization:** The stage before the journey toward jihadist activity begins. It involves young men from secular families with no significant connection to religion, who are normative, work regular jobs, spend their leisure time in typical social settings and have no criminal background.
- ◆ **The search for identity:** The stage usually begins with a personal crisis that leads the individual to search for a new path, direction, worldview and identity, both socially, politically and ideologically.
- ◆ **Indoctrination:** The stage involves shaping and solidifying the new ideological path chosen by the individual with the help of religious "breeding grounds" promoting Salafi

³ See, for example, Silber, M & Bhatt, A. (2007). "Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat." NYPD Intelligence Division, The New York City Police Department, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/NYPDradicalization.pdf>

and Salafi-jihadi ideology, such as mosques, Islamic centers and religious study groups. It is characterized by a growing detachment from the individual's family and old social circles, eventually leading to a complete severance.

- ◆ **Jihad:** The individual decides to dedicate himself to "militant" activities, and even sacrifice his life as part of the global jihad and against its "enemies" worldwide.
- ▶ Ahmed al-Sharaa's search for identity began with a personal crisis during his final year at Omar bin Abdul Aziz High School in Damascus, when he fell in love with an Alawite girl. Both sets of parents opposed the relationship and ended it (Middle East Eye, June 22, 2021). He became alienated and estranged from his family, reflected in a significant decline in his academic performance (Syria TV, December 24, 2023).
- ▶ Two events, one regional and one international, accelerated his radicalization (PBS, June 1, 2021):
 - ◆ **The outbreak of the second intifada in 2000:** al-Sharaa said he sought a way to fulfill his duty to assist in the defense of "people oppressed by invaders and occupiers." He admitted that despite ideological differences, his father influenced him regarding "love for Palestine" and a desire to "protect" the Palestinians.
 - ◆ **The September 11, 2001:** al-Qaeda attacks in the United States: According to al-Sharaa, everyone living in the Arab or Islamic world at the time rejoiced at the attack.
- ▶ Al-Sharaa grew closer to religion and adopted Salafi and Salafi-jihadi ideology. He began attending discreet religious gatherings in Damascus and joined religious study groups. He grew a beard, adopted traditional Islamic attire, and tried to emulate the lifestyle and appearance of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden (Syria TV, December 24, 2023).

Activity in Iraq

- ▶ After the September 11, 2001 attacks, President George Bush declared a global war on terrorism, and American forces invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 and later Iraq in March 2003. Amid preparations for the American invasion of Iraq, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad called on young people to fight the Americans and established a logistical infrastructure on Syrian soil that enabled the recruitment and transportation of operatives to Iraq.
- ▶ Al-Sharaa used the Syrian infrastructure to reach Baghdad about three weeks before the start of the American invasion. Initially, he joined the jihadist Saraya al-Mujahideen, and

organization which fought in Mosul.⁴ In 2004, he joined al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Syria TV, December 24, 2023). According to al-Sharaa, he never met al-Zarqawi and opposed his mass-killing tactics, which also harmed innocent people. However, he remained committed to the ideology of jihad and advanced quickly within the organization. According to American intelligence, al-Sharaa commanded one of the organization's cells and was part of the inner circle in its hierarchical command structure (PBS, June 1, 2021).

► At the end of 2004, al-Sharaa was arrested by American forces and detained at Camp Bucca in southeastern Iraq until the end of 2010. During his internment he wrote a 50-page essay explaining how to conduct jihad in Syria and gave lectures to detainees about what he described as the "true concepts" of Islam and jihad, in contrast to those promoting "false ideas" and forcing others to behave "in a certain way." He also used the lengthy internment to establish connections with jihad leaders in Iraq who were detained with him and who, upon their release, assumed senior leadership roles in the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the new iteration of al-Qaeda's branch, now led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (PBS, June 1, 2021; Syria TV, December 24, 2023).⁵ During those years, al-Sharaa adopted the alias Abu Mohammed al-Julani to signify his family origins from the Golan.

The Move to Syria and the Establishment of Jabhat al-Nusra⁶

► Upon his release, al-Sharaa contacted Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, whom he had met during his imprisonment and who was appointed emir of the Nineveh Province of the Islamic State of Iraq. Following al-Turkmani's advice, al-Sharaa sent a letter to al-Baghdadi detailing his vision for Syria and included the essay he had written in prison. With the wave of protests and

⁴ Saraya al-Mujahideen was a small jihadist organization operating in Iraq, gaining notoriety for the kidnapping of three Japanese civilians in April 2003, during which it threatened to burn them alive if the Japanese government did not withdraw its forces from Iraq. Later, the organization joined the regional umbrella organization Faluja Mujahideen Shura, which was closely affiliated with al-Zarqawi's organization (CENTCOM, May 2015; Long War Journal, June 18, 2014).

⁵ After al-Zarqawi was eliminated in a U.S. strike in June 2006, his successors established an umbrella organization that unified dozens of small Islamic-ideology groups operating in the arena under the banner of the "Islamic State of Iraq" (ISI). The organization's two leaders were eliminated on the same day in the spring of 2010, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was appointed as the new leader.

⁶ For further information, see Charles Lister (July 2016), "Profiling Jabhat Al Nusra," Brookings Institution; Soufan Ali (2017), Anatomy of Terror – From the death of Bin Laden to the rise of the Islamic state, Norton & company; Hassan Hassan, "I went to university with rebel leader Jolani – I wonder if he has really turned his back on jihad", Daily Telegraph, 8 December 2024.

revolutions that erupted in the Arab world at the end of 2010, including the uprising against the Assad regime in Syria in March 2011, al-Baghdadi accepted al-Sharaa's idea. The two even met in person, although al-Sharaa admitted that he was not impressed by al-Baghdadi's personality or abilities (PBS, June 1, 2021; al-Jazeera, December 18, 2013). According to al-Sharaa, although he disagreed with al-Baghdadi's views and methods, he understood that to advance his aspirations regarding Syria and secure funding and manpower, he needed to cooperate with the Islamic State, which was the strongest jihadist group (PBS, June 1, 2021).

► In August 2011, with \$60,000 in his possession, al-Sharaa crossed the border from Iraq to Syria with six other fighters from the Islamic State, most of whom were Syrians he had personally selected, and began organizing a new jihadist network and recruiting local operatives. The network operated under the name Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham (The Support Front for the People of the Levant), or simply Jabhat al-Nusra, whose strategy was to attack Assad regime forces in as many locations as possible.

► Jabhat al-Nusra's first operation took place at the end of December 2011, when two suicide bombers detonated themselves at Syrian intelligence facilities on the outskirts of Damascus. A month later, the organization publicly announced its establishment as a Salafi-jihadi force and declared war on the Assad regime. Al-Sharaa admitted that he would not have used suicide bombers if he had had access to aircraft or artillery (PBS, June 1, 2021).

► Consistent with al-Sharaa's strategy to establish an Islamic state in Syria based on Sharia [Islamic religious law], committees were appointed in every area liberated from the control of the Assad regime. The committees were responsible for the civil administration of the region through sub-departments such as security, legal affairs and civilian services to address the population's basic needs. Al-Sharaa ensured that the Sharia committees included representatives from other fighting groups, not just Jabhat al-Nusra.

► In his first media interview, given to al-Jazeera with his face concealed, he stated that Jabhat al-Nusra did not aspire to be the sole ruler of Syria. He added that if the group took control of Damascus, the religious scholars of the Levant would convene to formulate a plan for governing the country in an Islamic spirit under Sharia law. He also emphasized that minorities had lived under Islamic rule for over 1,400 years, claiming that Islam treated them equally [sic] and that their rights would be preserved (al-Jazeera, December 18, 2013).

Al-Sharaa Clashes with al-Baghdadi and Leaves ISIS

- ▶ Within a short time of its founding, Jabhat al-Nusra became prominent among the opponents of the Syrian regime. The organization took control of vast areas, inflicted significant damage on Syrian regime forces, formed alliances with local organizations and recruited numerous operatives, emphasizing civilian activities and avoiding the brutal combat and terrorist tactics characteristic of the Islamic State in Iraq. Jabhat al-Nusra accumulated wealth through donations, looting factories and taking ransom for hostages.
- ▶ Although Jabhat al-Nusra was still affiliated with the Islamic State in Iraq and transferred to it part of its profits, the rising popularity of al-Sharaa and the Syrian organization did not escape the notice of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In April 2013, al-Baghdadi unilaterally announced the subordination of Jabhat al-Nusra to the Islamic State in Iraq and the formation of a joint organization named the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Al-Sharaa, seeing al-Baghdadi's move as a blow to his interest in fostering ties with Syrian rebel groups without emphasizing his jihadist ideology, declared allegiance to al-Qaeda and its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri the next day. In May 2013, after failed mediation attempts, al-Zawahiri announced the separation between the Syrian and Iraqi theaters, with each organization becoming al-Qaeda's local branch in its respective area of operation.
- ▶ Al-Zawahiri's decision angered al-Baghdadi, who challenged al-Zawahiri's leadership of the global jihad camp. In June 2014, al-Baghdadi announced the establishment of the Islamic State Caliphate and himself as Caliph, creating an unprecedented rift in the Salafi-jihadi arena between ISIS and al-Qaeda. Consequently, violent clashes broke out in Syria between ISIS supporters and other rebel organizations, including Jabhat al-Nusra.
- ▶ Despite Jabhat al-Nusra's continued affiliation with al-Qaeda, al-Sharaa maneuvered between Salafi-jihadism and Syrian nationalism. However, with the Syrian army's recovery and the support Assad's regime received against the rebels from Iran, Hezbollah and Russia, al-Sharaa focused on the Syrian arena at the expense of ties with al-Qaeda, masking the Salafi-jihadi aspect of the organization. He recruited Syrian operatives, enhanced operational and logistical cooperation with local organizations, some with secular ideologies such as the Free Syrian Army, and concentrated operations against the Assad regime and ISIS. Meanwhile, American airstrikes targeting Jabhat al-Nusra, which was designated as a terrorist

organization, led al-Sharaa to distance himself from symbols associated with al-Qaeda and Salafi-jihadism. The United States also placed a \$10 million bounty on al-Sharaa's head.⁷

► In a May 2015 interview, al-Sharaa presented his "updated" ideology, emphasizing Syrian nationalism over global jihad. He said the organization was fighting only within Syria and against Hezbollah, which supported the Assad regime, and that there were directives to avoid attacks on the United States and the West from Syrian territory. He added that Jabhat al-Nusra fought only against those who fought it, and if the Alawites disassociated themselves from Assad's regime and laid down their arms they would receive protection. He also noted that they were not at war with Christians and he did not consider secular Muslims infidels (al-Jazeera, May 27, 2015). In another interview, he stated that the Kurds were Muslims and part of Syria (Orient News TV, December 12, 2015).



Al-Sharaa (with his back to the camera) in his first interview (al-Jazeera, May 27, 2015)

► At the same time, al-Sharaa continued to promote messages in the spirit of Salafi-jihadism.⁸ He said the Muslim Brotherhood was mistaken in its approach and would eventually resort to armed struggle and jihad.⁹ He gave the example of Mohammed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood who won the elections in Egypt after the fall of Mubarak's regime (2011), claiming that Morsi pursued policies contrary to Islam, such as establishing a parliament and recognizing the Camp David Accords, and was ultimately overthrown by the Egyptian army.

⁷ The bounty was canceled only after the Syrian revolution in December 2014, following a meeting between al-Sharaa and a senior American delegation.

⁸ For further information about his ideology, see the Appendix.

⁹ According to the Salafist doctrine developed in the 1920s by Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the state should be governed by Sharia [Islamic law], yet the means to achieve the goal were persuasion, education and winning hearts and minds, rather than violent methods. In the 1950s, the Salafi-jihadi movement emerged from the Muslim Brotherhood, founded by Sayyid Qutb and Abd al-Salam Faraj, advocating the implementation of Sharia law through violent holy war, jihad, against the infidel Arab rulers in various Arab states.

He said he and his followers would not compromise on their principles, would remain committed to implementing Sharia and would continue jihad and the fight against any enemy attacking them (al-Jazeera, June 3, 2015).

The Split from al-Qaeda

- ▶ The recovery of Assad's army, with significant support from Hezbollah, Iran and Russia, forced al-Sharaa to decide between his organization's Salafi-jihadism and Syrian nationalism. There were efforts to unify Syrian rebel groups in response to Russian aid to Assad's regime, as well as a growing understanding that the main obstacle to cooperation was the ambiguity of Jabhat al-Nusra's ties with al-Qaeda. Consequently, proponents of unification within Jabhat al-Nusra issued an ultimatum to al-Sharaa to completely cut ties with al-Qaeda.
- ▶ In July 2016, after receiving al-Zawahiri's blessing to break away from al-Qaeda to allow Jabhat al-Nusra to focus on the campaign in Syria and merge with local Islamic organizations, al-Sharaa appeared publicly for the first time and announced the severance from al-Qaeda and the establishment of Jabhat Fath al-Sham (The Front for the Conquest of the Levant). He emphasized that the new organization would continue to work for Islam and the implementation of Sharia while uniting all fighting forces in Syria to overthrow Assad's regime and defend jihad.¹⁰



Al-Sharaa (center) announcing the establishment of Jabhat Fath al-Sham (al-Jazeera, July 28, 2016).

- ▶ In addition to seeking to strengthen ties with local organizations, al-Sharaa wanted to reassure the United States and Western countries that his focus was solely on the struggle within Syria and not on promoting terrorism abroad. However, despite the move's seemingly having al-Zawahiri's approval, some al-Qaeda loyalists left Jabhat Fath al-Sham in protest

¹⁰ For further information, see the August 2016 ITIC report, "[The establishment of the Fateh al-Sham Front in place of the Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria: reasons and implications](#)"

over the split from the parent organization. Additionally, Syrian rebel groups, led by Ahrar al-Sham, remained skeptical of al-Sharaa's unification efforts, resulting in violent clashes.

- ▶ On January 28, 2017, al-Sharaa announced the formation of a new organization, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which was a merger of Jabhat Fath al-Sham with four other prominent rebel groups: the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, Liwa al-Haqq, Jabhat Ansar al-Din and Jaysh al-Sunna. The creation of the new organization marked the definitive break between al-Sharaa and al-Qaeda, particularly following al-Sharaa's growing rapprochement to secular Turkey. After failed reconciliation attempts, including the involvement of Islamic religious scholars, al-Zawahiri officially declared that the Syrian organization had completely severed ties with al-Qaeda. In consequence, some hardline jihadist supporters left the new unified organization and formed Hurras al-Din, which became al-Qaeda's branch in Syria.
- ▶ Despite choosing to pursue a Syrian-nationalist agenda, al-Sharaa continued to use jihadist and pan-Islamic rhetoric associated with al-Qaeda. In a video released by a media outlet affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in January 2018, he encouraged his followers, stating, "We will not only reach Damascus, Jerusalem also awaits us." He added that they had established themselves as chosen jihadist fighters among billions of people (MEMRI, January 27, 2018). However, he explained that the attacks on the Russian Khmeimim base (southeast of Latakia, Syria) were because of Russia's support for the Assad regime and its role in killing Syrians, not as part of a pan-Islamic struggle against infidels (MEMRI, May 27, 2019).



Right: Al-Sharaa in conversation with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham operatives (Orient News YouTube channel, November 30, 2017). Left: Al-Sharaa planning operations in the command room (Shahed Ayyan Aleppo Facebook page, March 24, 2017)

- ▶ Under al-Sharaa's leadership, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham became the dominant organization in the Turkish-backed enclave established in the Idlib region of northwestern Syria, part of efforts to end the civil war. The organization established a civilian administrative infrastructure under the supervision of the Syrian Salvation Government, and issued identity

documents. Al-Sharaa also assured the Kurdish, Druze and Christian minorities living in areas under the organization's control that they were an important and integral part of the Syrian state, pledged to protect their rights and in some cases returned property previously taken from them. However, the organization was also accused of human rights and civil rights violations (The New York Times, December 2, 2024).

► The ambivalence of al-Sharaa's approach continued in Idlib. He said society should be governed according to Sharia and that democracy had no place in his doctrine, yet emphasized that women had rights, noting that two-thirds of the students in universities in the "liberated" territories of Idlib were women (PBS, June 1, 2021). Despite his attempts to instill conservative Sharia-inspired values in Idlib, he did not enforce Sharia effectively over the years. He did not mandate women wear the niqab [full body covering], although he insisted they wear the hijab [head covering]. He allowed men and women to mix in shopping centers and restaurants, while gender segregation was enforced in schools. Over time, he moderated the use of physical punishments, such as flogging and stoning, in contrast to practices used by Salafi-jihadi operatives (Middle East Eye, December 4, 2024).

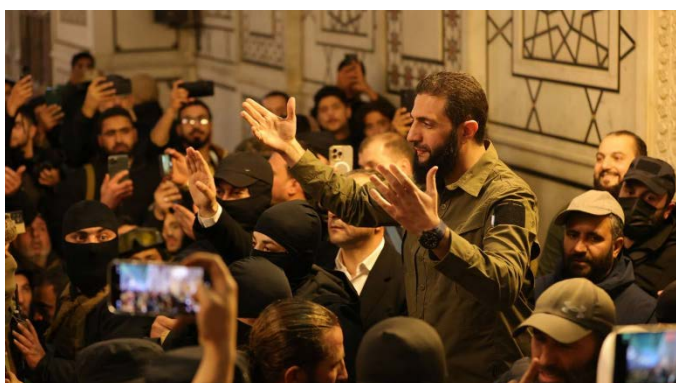
► In the meantime, al-Sharaa presented a more moderate image, both to local residents and to the international arena, particularly the United States and the West, including transitioning to civilian attire and abandoning overt Islamic representation. In his first interview with Western media, he explained that the American decision to designate him as a terrorist was incorrect and unjust. He emphasized that his organization's involvement with al-Qaeda had ended and that, despite his ideological roots in Salafi-jihadism, he did not support the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate. He said his connection to global jihad organizations was within the broader context of events over the past 30 years, during which the region had been dominated by iron-fisted totalitarian rulers (PBS, June 1, 2021).



Right: Al-Sharaa with operatives in Idlib (Baladi News, June 1, 2020). Left: Al-Sharaa at the ceremony opening the road between Aleppo and Bab al-Hawa (The Syrian Observer, January 10, 2022)

Al-Sharaa, Leader of Syria

► The relationships al-Sharaa established in Idlib with Turkey and Syrian power elements operating under Ankara's patronage, primarily the Syrian National Army, solidified Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's status as the leading organization among Assad regime opponents and laid the groundwork for the cooperation that led to Operation Deterrence of Aggression, which began on November 27, 2024, and concluded with the capture of Damascus and the overthrow of Assad's regime on December 8, 2024.¹¹



Right: Al-Sharaa upon his arrival in Aleppo after the liberation (Telegram channel of the General Command - Syria, December 4, 2024). Left: Al-Sharaa upon his arrival in Damascus (Telegram channel of the General Command - Syria, December 9, 2024)

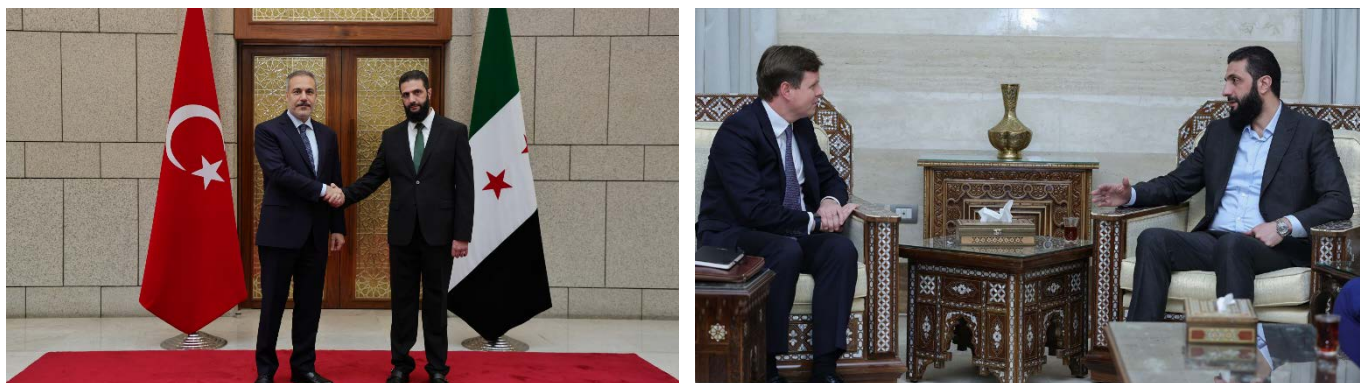
► Al-Sharaa implemented the governance model used in Idlib across all the territories under the revolutionaries' control in Syria. The Syrian Salvation Government became the foundation for an interim government expected to govern at least until March 2025. Additionally, committees were established to address civil issues in various provinces, including waste removal, provision of electricity, water, bread, stabilization of the public sphere following the

¹¹ For further information, see the December 2024 ITIC reports, "The Power Groups in Syria after the Fall of the Assad Regime," and <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/the-power-groups-in-syria-after-the-fall-of-the-assad-regime/>

anarchy prevalent during Assad's regime, restitution of stolen property to its owners, collection of weapons and ensuring the provision of public services (Daraa24, December 23, 2024).

► As Syria's new leader, al-Sharaa continued to present pragmatic positions both domestically and internationally, even abandoning the alias Abu Mohammed al-Julani. He reached out to Kurdish, Druze and Christian minorities, emphasizing that they were an important and integral part of the Syrian state, pledging to protect their rights, and in some cases ordering the return of property previously taken from them. He also called for laws to be enacted by the people through bodies such as an advisory council and a Shura council (CNN, December 6, 2024; al-Hadath, December 29, 2024). He stated that governance had to exist under the umbrella of Islamic Sharia but not according to the standards of ISIS or Saudi Arabia (Middle East Eye, December 4, 2024).

► Since assuming power, al-Sharaa has hosted meetings with foreign delegations, primarily from the Arab world but also from the United States, Turkey and Ukraine, where he expressed his desire to usher in a new era in Syria which would accommodate all sects and minorities and distance the country from military conflicts. To solidify his new position, he replaced the military uniform he wore during Operation Deterrence of Aggression with tailored suits (Telegram channel of the General Command - Syria, December 9, 2024 - January 1, 2025).



Right: Al-Sharaa meets with a British delegation at the Presidential Palace in Damascus (Telegram channel of the General Command - Syria, December 16, 2024). Left: Al-Sharaa, wearing a suit and tie for the first time, meets with the Turkish Foreign Minister (Telegram channel of the General Command - Syria, December 22, 2024)

► After meeting with al-Sharaa, Barbara Leaf, American Assistant Secretary of State, said she had been impressed by his pragmatism (BBC, December 20, 2024). Syrian expatriates who met with al-Sharaa, including doctors and businesspeople, as well as high-ranking figures in the American tech industry, expressed admiration for him and the seriousness of his intentions.

Dr. Tarek Qutleh said al-Sharaa had "great perspective, vision and strategy. He is a first-class orator and a distinguished statesman. He reads extensively and is interested in technology and development projects. Everyone in the room, from religious conservatives to liberals, admired what he had to say" (Syrian News Agency, December 26, 2024).

Al-Sharaa vs Israel and the Jews

► Al-Sharaa said he "loved Palestine" and supported "defending" the Palestinians, but despite the centrality of Israel and Jews in Salafi-jihadi ideology, throughout his years of activity in jihadist organizations he rarely addressed the issue directly, making limited reference to Israel and Jews during his time with Jabhat al-Nusra:

- ◆ In a speech in July 2014, he told his followers, "There is nothing separating us from the Jews but a fence of a few meters on vast land, and if we wanted to attack them, we would." He added that since the Balfour Declaration in 1920, the Muslim nation had suffered humiliations, and now Muslims were waiting for the fighters of Jabhat al-Nusra to complete the mission and fight the Jews. He emphasized that first Assad's regime had to be eliminated before turning to the Jews and asked his fighters, "Will you stay with us until we liberate al-Aqsa?"

- ◆ In a speech in September 2014, he claimed that "Palestine and Jordan" were in the hands of the Jews because the forces defeated by Islam were attempting to redraw the conflict map in the region and divide control. He stated that any military intervention against Muslims would meet with a "volcano erupting" from the peoples of the region.

- ◆ In his first television interview in 2015, he noted that the Jews were in "Palestine" under the pretext that they had lived there 3,500 years ago and that for them, it was the Promised Land. He also stated that "Palestine" was the heart of the world, with its "wings" of Egypt and the Levant, and whoever controlled it held the reins of the globe. That, he said, was why "certain forces" dominated the region (al-Jazeera, June 6, 2015).

► After the Syrian revolution ended, and in light of IDF activity in the demilitarized zone in the Golan Heights and Israeli airstrikes on security facilities in Syria, al-Sharaa emphasized that after Assad's regime was overthrown Israel had no excuse to attack Syrian territory. He called for diplomatic intervention to stop violations in the region. However, he expressed a desire to avoid conflict with Israel, arguing that Syria was exhausted from years of fighting and that he wanted to focus on rebuilding the state (Syria TV, December 14, 2024).

- ▶ In all probability, formulating policy toward Israel, as well as other issues, will have to wait until the transitional period ends and governance is stabilized. At that point, al-Sharaa will need to address the gaps between the moderate image he seeks to project and his jihadist past, as well as the presence of radical global jihad elements within the military coalition he created in Idlib, especially concerning Israel.
- ▶ Currently, Israel continues its preventive and defensive actions in the demilitarized zone in the Golan Heights and the Syrian Hermon, alongside the destruction of specialized weaponry left from Bashar al-Assad's regime across Syria.

Appendix: Al-Sharaa's Ideology ¹²

- ▶ Ahmed al-Sharaa is not only a military and political leader but also takes pride in the title of Sheikh or the "Conquering Sheikh" (al-Sheikh al-Fateh), reflecting religious authority. However, as far as is known, he has no formal religious education and acquired his religious knowledge by studying it himself.¹³ He does not claim to be the supreme religious authority in his organization and has stated that the organization consults with various religious scholars on jurisprudential issues, with none holding the status of supreme authority (marjaiya).
- ▶ Although al-Sharaa has not published religious literature, his religious worldview can be identified by his statements, publications, interviews and recorded speeches available on platforms linked to him until 2019, prior to his shift to a seemingly pragmatic political leadership. Some of his core religious views:

- ◆ **Establishment of a state governed by Sharia:** Al-Sharaa sees the primary goal as the establishment of a "pure" Islamic state governed by Sharia, representing divine law, achieved through jihad and sacrifice. Legislation contrary to Sharia is considered as having being created by humans and is therefore invalid, which explains his opposition to secularism and Western democracy. He advocates for a system of consultation (Shura) rooted in the time of Prophet Muhammad. He has stated that if Sunni Muslims unite around the Qur'an, no power in the world can resist them. To achieve this, the

¹² A collection of materials presenting Al-Sharaa's ideology can be found in "Lessons of Sheikh Abu Mohammed al-Julani" [in Arabic] on a site that compiles writings of Islamic thinkers. The texts serving as the source for this section of the research are taken from there: <https://ketabonline.com/ar/books/106877>.

¹³ Sometimes referred to as "partial Ijtihad," a self-driven effort in religious learning, it characterizes many leaders within radical Islamic organizations.

tyrannical rulers (tawaghit) of Arab and Muslim states, who serve the West and Jews and oppress their people, must be removed.

◆ **Establishment of a pan-Islamic Caliphate:** While al-Sharaa considers it a worthy goal, he criticizes ISIS's approach as illegitimate. He claimed that ISIS improperly declared a Caliphate, coerced people into joining and took action against other Islamic movements. He believes the true path to a caliphate begins with creating an exemplary Islamic state in the land of Greater Syria (Bilad al-Sham).

◆ **The issue of takfir, declaring other Muslims infidels:** Al-Sharaa holds that declaring Muslims as infidels is a jurisprudential matter reserved for religious scholars, and thus his movement does not make such declarations. That distinguishes it from ISIS, which, like the early Kharijites, engages in takfir without religious basis. He also opposes labeling entire societies, such as Egyptian or Syrian society, as infidel, viewing them as fundamentally Muslim societies with exceptions who may be deemed infidels.

◆ **Relations with Iran and Shi'ites:** Al-Sharaa is hostile toward Shi'ites, Iran and its Middle Eastern proxies. He interprets Iran's aspiration for regional dominance as rooted in a history spanning thousands of years. Before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, such motivation was based on Persian identity; afterward, it shifted to Shi'ite identity, aiming to convert populations to Shi'a. Following Salafi-jihadi conventions, al-Sharaa derogatorily refers to Shi'ites as "rejectionists" (Rawafid), accusing them of denying the legitimacy of the first three caliphs in favor of Ali ibn Abi Talib.

◆ **Status of Druze and Alawites:** Al-Sharaa regards Druze and Alawites as having removed themselves from Islam and committed acts of idolatry (shirk), such as turning graves into shrines. He claims emissaries were sent to explain their theological errors and that some responded positively.

◆ **Relations with Christians:** Al-Sharaa asserts that his forces do not fight those who do not fight them but states that capable Christians must pay the Jizya (poll tax) imposed on monotheistic minorities, i.e., Jews and Christians, in Islamic states.

◆ **Relations with the Muslim Brotherhood:** Al-Sharaa views the Muslim Brotherhood's approach as flawed because they allied with the West, fought against jihadist movements, and sought power through elections and parliaments, which only led to their defeat. He urges them to learn from their failures, return to their faith roots as exemplified in the writings of Sayyid Qutb, and adopt the path of jihad.

- ◆ **Relations with ISIS:** Al-Sharaa describes ISIS as "extremists," accusing them of excessive radicalism (ghula) in issues such as takfir, the caliphate, killing innocents, indiscriminate and brutal attacks, and the abduction and enslavement of women.
- ◆ **Flexibility and pragmatism:** Al-Sharaa emphasizes that certain principles, such as Islamic governance, Sharia law and achieving them through jihad, are immutable. However, he acknowledges tactical questions which allow for some flexibility based on jurisprudential discretion (ijtihad) and circumstances. He also advocates for a gradual approach to implementing Sharia, considering situational factors.