

# MP-IDSA *Commentary*

## Al-Jolani: The Transformed Jihadist?

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### **S***ummary*

The victory of HTS is a major triumph for Salafi-jihadist groups and raises the prospect of a larger pan-jihadist spectre.

Ahmad Al Sharaa, the new leader of Syria and chief of the jihadist group Hayat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS),<sup>1</sup> was earlier known as Abu Mohammad Al-Jolani, a second-in-command of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and a deputy chief of ISIS in 2013.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps inspired by the story of Paul, who spiritually transformed from a bounty hunter into an apostle on the road to Damascus, Ahmad Al Sharaa now claims to have changed from being a merciless mercenary into a purveyor of peace towards “all religious groups”.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, he has pledged to protect Christians and other minorities in Syria and not to wage wars with the West. He even speaks of alleviating the humanitarian crisis in his country, including the repatriation of Syrian refugees now living abroad, which has strained ties between Turkey and Europe. This blade-running Salafi replicant, we are told, has finally found his humanity, and is thus longing for a longer lifespan.<sup>4</sup>

Although still sceptical, the US administration seems to be liking what it hears. For one, it is impressed that the terrorist with a US\$ 10 million bounty on his head has dropped the word ‘al-Jolani’ from his new name—a transliteration derived from the Golan Heights (Arabic transliteration ‘Al Murtafatul Jolan’), from where his family was supposedly displaced by the Israelis.<sup>5</sup>

More importantly, the Jolani-led Hayat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS) group has been able to draw a wedge in a growing Sunni–Shia convergence, by breaking Iran’s land bridge to the Mediterranean—passing through Iraq and Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon—which has collapsed at a critical time in the ongoing regional war.

With the removal of the Shia Alawite Al-Assad regime and its replacement with Al-Jolani’s Sunni ‘takfiri’ ideology in Syria, the US may feel relieved from being dragged into a widening West Asian conflict. Israel is now fully capable of defeating Hezbollah on its own, with the latter’s logistical and military supplies being largely cut off from Iran.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Haltiwanger, “[What to Know about the Man Who Toppled Assad](#)”, *Foreign Policy*, 11 December 2024.

<sup>2</sup> “[Who is Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, the Leader of Syria's Rebel Offensive?](#)”, *The New Arab*, 1 December 2024.

<sup>3</sup> “[New Syria PM Says Will 'Guarantee' All Religious Groups' Rights](#)”, *Le Monde* with AFP, 11 December 2024.

<sup>4</sup> This is with reference to the Ridley Scott directed, Harrison Ford-starrer sci-fi classic “Blade Runner” (1982), in which bio-engineered humanoids called replicants, who are programmed to fight, eventually develop compassionate human traits and seek a longer lifespan than the four years given to them.

<sup>5</sup> Andreas Kluth, “[Syria's Rebel Leader Al-Jolani Needs a Chance](#)”, *Bloomberg Opinion*, 9 December 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Alissa J. Rubin, “[With Assad's Fall, Iran's Axis of Resistance Unravels](#)”, *The New York Times*, 8 December 2024.

## The Disingenuous Media

There is a raging debate in the West whether the HTS group (earlier known as Jabhat Al Nusra) should still be deemed a terrorist organisation, as some officials believe it can be an excellent counterfoil to Iranian expansionist designs in the Arab world. In fact, many leaders in the US and UK are calling for a reassessment of the HTS as a force for good, although much of the debate has reportedly been behind closed doors.<sup>7</sup>

The Western media is also trying to project Al-Jolani in a more favourable light. Thus, *The Times* headline reads: “Who is Abu Mohammad Al Jolani? ‘Polite’ Syrian Leader Heads Home”,<sup>8</sup> while the *CNN* tells us “How Syria’s rebel leader went from a radical jihadist to a blazer wearing ‘revolutionary’”.<sup>9</sup> For its part, *The Telegraph* informs, “Moderate jihadist leader storms Syria—but tells troops not to frighten children”,<sup>10</sup> while The Washington Institute for Near East Policy carries the headline “How Syria’s ‘Diversity-Friendly’ Jihadists Plan on Building a State”.<sup>11</sup> This is certainly a far cry from the position taken earlier by the Western media agencies. In 2013, the *CNN* had called Al-Jolani one of “the world’s 10 most dangerous terrorists”, involved in abducting, torturing and slaughtering racial and religious minorities.<sup>12</sup>

This apparent naïveté of Western media may prove dangerous as the HTS still remains close to several radical Islamist groups in Syria in spite of its tactical differences with them. These groups include Ansar Al-Tawhid, Ahrar al-Sham, Harras al-Din, Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, The Turkistan Islamic Party in Syria, among others.<sup>13</sup> In a scathing criticism, Alan McLeod states that the Western media has gone too far in justifying the change of regime in Syria and is thus re-branding Jolani from the erstwhile ‘terrorist’ to a ‘freedom fighter’, even as Syria’s new ‘Woke’ leader.<sup>14</sup>

This naivete of the West seems inexplicable as after taking control of Damascus, HTS fighters posted a video on Facebook, declaring that just as they have entered the

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<sup>7</sup> Cathrin Schaer, “[Time to Take Syria's Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Off Terror Lists?](#)”, *Deutsche Welle*, 12 December 2024.

<sup>8</sup> “[Who is Abu Mohammad Al Jolani? ‘Polite’ Syrian Leader Heads Home](#)”, *The Times*, 12 December 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Mostafa Salem, “[How Syria’s Rebel Leader Went from a Radical Jihadist to a Blazer Wearing ‘Revolutionary’](#)”, *CNN World*, 6 December 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Ben Farmer, “[Moderate Jihadist Leader Storms Syria — But Tells Troops Not to Frighten Children](#)”, *The Telegraph*, 30 November 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, “[How Syria’s ‘Diversity-Friendly’ Jihadists Plan on Building a State](#)”, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 3 December 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Tim Lister, “[Who are the World’s 10 Most Dangerous Terrorists?](#)”, *CNN World*, 9 October 2013.

<sup>13</sup> “[Who is Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, the Leader of Syria's Rebel Offensive?](#)”, no. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Alan Macleod, “[From ‘Terrorist’ to ‘Freedom Fighter’: How the West Rebranded Al-Qaeda’s Jolani as Syria’s ‘Woke’ New Leader](#)”, *Scheerpost*, 13 December 2024.

Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, they will enter the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, and the Kaaba in Mecca.<sup>15</sup>

It is truly remarkable that Al-Jolani is viewed as dubious a leader as Bashar Al-Assad,<sup>16</sup> who betrayed even his jihadist mentors for political gain, and is capable of swapping sides in rapidly changing times. Writing for Rolling Stone, Mac William Bishop goes to the extent of characterising Jolani as a “ruthlessly pragmatic, astute politician who has renounced ‘global jihad’”.<sup>17</sup> During his administration of Idlib, Jolani faced large public protests over several allegations of brutality, with reports of thousands of critics held in prisons, and economic grievances related to high taxes.<sup>18</sup>

### **Syria: A Russian Trap for the West?**

On coming to power, there would be more reasons for Jolani to shape-shift back to his jihadist mould than continue with his pro-Western makeover. As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza and West Bank continues, there would be greater pressure on the new Syrian leader to intervene in that conflict.

In fact, Israel’s large incursion into south Syria and its massive aerial bombardment of its military infrastructure is already weighing on the mind of the new Syrian potentate. With Al-Assad out of the way, it would not be long before HTS joins its patron Turkey and Iran to fight the Kurdish resistance groups in northeastern Syria, and with the help of Russia take on the looming Israeli threat.

There are conspiracy theories swirling around that Russia, along with Iran and Turkey, planned the early collapse of a rapidly unravelling Al-Assad regime to lure Israel and the West into the Syrian quagmire.<sup>19</sup> This would explain the rapid collapse of the Syrian regime and the fact that neither Russia, Iran nor Hezbollah came to the rescue of Bashar Al-Assad in his hour of crisis. There is no denying that Israel and the US are already trapped in Syria and Trump might have a hard time to salvage US prestige in any deal with Russia after assuming presidency.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> [“Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham \(HTS\) Islamist Militants in Damascus Declare: We Will Enter Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, The Prophet’s Mosque in Medina, and the Kaaba in Mecca, Just Like We Entered the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus”](#), MEMRI TV, 8 December 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Anchal Vohra, [“Is Jolani Any Better Than Assad?”](#), *Foreign Policy*, 10 December 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Mac William Bishop, [“An Islamic Rebel Leader Rises, Challenging Syria’s Dictator”](#), Rolling Stone, 3 December 2024.

<sup>18</sup> [“Protests have Erupted Against Another Syrian Dictator”](#), *The Economist*, 4 April 2024.

<sup>19</sup> CapitalCosm, [“Did Russia Just Set a Huge Trap in Syria: Alex Trainer”](#), Youtube, 8 December 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Danny Haiphong, [“Brian Berletic: Russia Just Set a MASSIVE Trap for NATO in Syria as West Destroys Itself”](#), Youtube, 15 December 2024.

## The Secret Connect of Al-Qaeda and Iran

If this scenario unfolds as posited, Al-Jolani would only be following Al-Qaeda’s well-established, though secretive, association with Shia Iran, which the US claims to have continued for nearly three decades. According to the 9/11 Commission report,<sup>21</sup> Al-Qaeda operatives reportedly travelled to Iran and the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon in the early 1990s—the heartland of Hezbollah—for explosives training. It is also reported that Osama bin Laden’s son, Hamza bin Laden, along with other Al-Qaeda members got refuge in Iran for several years after the 9/11 attacks.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, a letter from Bin Laden, found by the Navy SEALs during the Abbottabad raid, sheds light on the Iran–Al-Qaeda relationship since 9/11 very well. “Iran is our main artery for funds, personnel, and communication...There is no need to fight with Iran unless you are forced to”, writes the founder of Al-Qaeda just before his death.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the belief that Al-Qaeda elements can have no truck with Shia radical groups or with Iran because of the Sunni–Shia differences cannot be considered an incontrovertible fact.

Unlike the more divisive Salafi ISIS, the HTS follows a more inclusive and pan-Islamist agenda, which makes even Shia Houthis of Yemen send out a positive message on its coming to power,<sup>24</sup> along with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup>

Certainly, the implications of the rise of this rebranded Al-Qaeda 2.0 is a potentially disturbing development and may further worsen the ongoing Israel conflict with its Muslim neighbours. Undoubtedly, the victory of HTS is a major triumph for Salafi-jihadist groups around the world, just as the fall of the Al-Assad regime is a major blow for the secular socialist regimes in Central Asia, as well as for countries like Egypt in the wider Middle East.

In fact, the Syrian coup has the potential to reduce Russia’s global influence and further enhance Turkey’s Islamist clout in the Muslim world. This raises the prospect of a larger pan-jihadist spectre on India’s western front, and necessitates a carefully calibrated and proactive approach.

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<sup>21</sup> [“The Foundation of the New Terrorism”](#), The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 61.

<sup>22</sup> Adam Goldman, Eric Schmitt, Farnaz Fassihi and Ronen Bergman, [“Al Qaeda's No. 2, Accused in U.S. Embassy Attacks, is Secretly Killed in Iran”](#), *The New York Times*, 14 November 2020.

<sup>23</sup> [“The Iran-Al-Qaeda Axis”](#), US Embassy in Georgia, 13 January 2021.

<sup>24</sup> [“Houthis Say They Would Support HTS if They Confront Israel”](#), *Middle East Eye*, 9 December 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Karishma Saurabh Kalita, [“Taliban Congratulates Syrians After Assad Fall: Removal of Factor of Conflict”](#), *India Today*, 9 December 2024.

## About the Author



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