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Good Jihadi, bad Jihadi: Al-Qaeda's Sharaa vs Sinwar's resistance

In a world where western powers selectively define ‘good’ and ‘bad’ political actors to serve their geopolitical agenda, martyred Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar is demonized for resisting a brutal and illegal occupation, while Syria’s new Al-Qaeda-linked president Abu Mohammad al-Julani is rebranded as a statesman.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

“Even the pages of the New York Times now include regular accounts distinguishing good from bad Muslims: good Muslims are modern, secular, and Westernized, but bad Muslims are doctrinal, antimodern, and virulent.” – Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*

In his seminal work, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*, Mahmood Mamdani dissects how the west constructs and weaponizes distinctions between “good” and “bad” Muslims to suit its geopolitical objectives. He argues that these

labels are not inherent but imposed, shaped by the shifting demands of western foreign policy.

Nearly two decades after its publication, his thesis remains alarmingly relevant. Nowhere is this clearer than in the stark contrast between the west's treatment of Yahya Sinwar, the martyred Palestinian resistance leader of Hamas, and Ahmad al-Sharaa, better known as Abu Mohammad al-Julani, the head of Al-Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria.

A tale of two leaders

While Sinwar has spent the past year in the war-ravaged ruins of Gaza, constantly evading Israeli and NATO surveillance while leading the Palestinian resistance against a brutal Israeli occupation and aggression, Sharaa moved freely through Idlib, and now Damascus, attending public events and meeting western diplomats without significant security measures.

This is despite the fact that the US had placed a \$10 million bounty on Sharaa's head as a so-called terrorist. The incongruence is striking: an internationally recognized Palestinian resistance leader hunted and vilified, while a former Al-Qaeda affiliate leader rebrands himself as a legitimate political actor with western complicity.

Back in 2021, *TRT World* noted how Sharaa was “remodeling” himself as a peacemaker, enjoying unimpeded mobility even as western coalition forces actively hunted other jihadist leaders linked to ISIS and Al-Qaeda.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan later confirmed that Sharaa had been collaborating with Ankara for years in eliminating those classified by NATO as “terrorists.” The reality, however, is that Sharaa has been part of a western-backed laundering process for years, at least since 2012, but certainly since 2017, when with Qatari backing, he began rebranding his Al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front as a Syrian liberation force opposing Russian and Iranian influence.

Media whitewashing and political legitimacy

The western media's embrace of Sharaa was made explicit when *The Times* described his return to Damascus as that of “‘Polite’ Syrian leader heads home.” This was not an isolated occurrence but part of a broader effort to frame him as a liberator from foreign influence. His past crimes, including war crimes against civilians, enslavement of Yazidi women, and sectarian violence, were conveniently brushed aside.

When Sharaa's group took control of Damascus last December, the alignment with western interests became clearer. Israeli airstrikes systematically dismantled Syria's military infrastructure, particularly in and around the capital, yet Sharaa himself moved through the city undisturbed.

While the Israeli Air Force bombed military sites near Umayyad Square, Sharaa was seen casually driving through the same areas. His silence on these attacks was deafening – especially given that his administration’s official stance on Israel marked a complete break from Syria’s historic anti-Zionist policies.

Statements from his government indicated no intention to reclaim the occupied Golan Heights or other lost territories, signaling a de facto truce with Tel Aviv.

The west’s legitimization of Sharaa reached its peak when his Foreign Minister, Asaad al-Shaibani, was invited to attend the World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos, sharing a stage with figures like former British prime minister Tony Blair.

His rhetoric was tailored for a western audience: peace, counterterrorism, privatization, and economic liberalism – all buzzwords signaling a willingness to operate within the neoliberal world order.

Demonizing resistance: Sinwar’s struggle

Meanwhile, Israel continued its relentless campaign against Yahya Sinwar, branding him a “butcher,” a “war criminal,” and a “child killer” – a narrative eagerly parroted by western media despite its lack of substantiation.

Even as the alleged war crimes attributed to Hamas fighters on 7 October 2023 were later exposed as Israeli propaganda, Sinwar’s image remained demonized. In his final moments, as an Israeli drone executed him in Gaza, Sinwar did not cower. He fought until his last breath, cementing his status as an icon of Palestinian resistance. Yet even in death, the western narrative denied him any form of legitimacy.

Julani’s convenient redemption

Conversely, Sharaa’s past was erased. His involvement with the Islamic State in Iraq, his position as deputy leader of ISIS under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, his group’s mass executions, and his forces’ role in the enslavement of women were all conveniently overlooked.

Western journalists competed to polish his image, portraying him as a pragmatic leader rather than the war criminal he is. His forces still operate brutal prisons in Idlib, where opponents disappear indefinitely, yet he remains a media darling.

This contrast illustrates Mamdani’s thesis with unsettling precision: Sharaa is the “good jihadist” because he aligns with western-Israeli interests, while Sinwar is the “bad jihadist” because he defies them.

Sinwar’s crime was not terrorism – it was successfully challenging the occupation’s military, exposing the vulnerabilities of an Israel long perceived as invincible. His resistance resonated

across the Arab and Muslim world, cutting across sectarian lines and threatening western interests.

Sharaa, on the other hand, poses no threat to Israel. He remains focused on the sectarian score-settling within Syria, making him a useful pawn rather than an adversary. His group does not challenge Western influence in the region, nor does it resist the ongoing occupation of Palestinian land. This is the fundamental reason why he is embraced rather than demonized.

Sinwar may have fallen, but as the Quran reminds us: “And do not say about those who are killed in the way of Allah, ‘They are dead.’ Rather, they are alive, but you perceive it not.” (Quran 2:154). His legacy endures, living on in the hearts of those who continue his struggle. Sharaa, despite his crimes, remains alive and politically relevant. In the western geopolitical playbook, obedience is rewarded while defiance is crushed.

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