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Syria's new HTS government is a vehicle for imperialism's struggle to control the Middle East

The US, European and regional powers have all welcomed the fall of the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad at the hands of the al-Qaeda-linked group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—the Organization for the Liberation of the Levant.

They all believe they can utilise HTS as their subcontractor to further their geostrategic interests in the war-ravaged country, despite the Islamist terrorist organization al-Qaeda supposedly being Washington's number one enemy for decades.

In 2013, UN Resolution 2254 designated HTS's precursor, the al-Nusra Front, a terrorist organization, as did the US, because of its affiliation with al-Qaeda. In 2018, Washington designated the HTS a Foreign Terrorist Organisation and placed a \$10 million bounty on the head of its Syrian leader, Ahmed al-Shara'a, whose nom de guerre was Abu Mohammad al-Jolani.



Abu Mohammad al-Jolani

Two weeks after fall of Assad, the US lifted the bounty on Jolani. The Biden administration has now said it will recognise and support a new government in Syria if it commits to renouncing terrorism and destroying any chemical weapons depots in the country. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the new Syrian government must “uphold clear commitments to fully respect the rights of minorities, facilitate the flow of humanitarian assistance to all in need” and “prevent Syria from being used as a base for terrorism or posing a threat to its neighbours.” In that case, he continued, “We in turn will look at various sanctions and other measures that we have taken.”

France, Germany and the United Kingdom have all met with HTS officials in Damascus. British diplomats held discussions with al-Shara’a and were photographed with him, even though HTS is a proscribed terrorist organisation in the UK and expressing support for the group is a criminal offence. London announced that it would send £50 million (\$63 million) in humanitarian aid to Syria and Syrian refugees. Qatar has reestablished diplomatic relations with the country’s new leaders.

Turkey, which despite its close relations with HTS has long denied direct support, has reopened its embassy in Damascus. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan declared on Turkish television, “No one knows this group better than Turkey.” President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has pledged military and logistical support to HTS and is seeking to gain support from the Gulf nations, prompting al-Shara’a to announce that Syria would develop a strategic relationship with Ankara. He told Turkish newspaper *Yeni Safak*, “There will be strategic relations. Turkey has many priorities in the reconstruction of the new Syrian state.”

Thirteen years after at the start of the proxy war for regime change in Syria that was financed, orchestrated and supplied by the CIA, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Israel to undermine and isolate Iran, the imperialist and Middle East powers are deepening their collaboration with their al-Qaeda-linked proxies to plunder Syria. It is part of their broader struggle to control the region’s oil and gas resources and roll back the influence of Russia, Iran and China in the Middle East.

Despite the rhetoric about a global war against Islamist terrorism, the US has long utilised reactionary Islamist groups to suppress left nationalist and socialist movements in the Middle East and Asia, including in the CIA/MI6’s overthrow of the Mossadegh government in Iran in 1953 and the CIA-backed military coup and mass killings in Indonesia in 1965.

Al-Qaeda, which is only one of the most well-known of these outfits, was created by the CIA and Pakistani intelligence, with aid and finance from the Saudi monarchy, under the leadership of Osama bin-Laden, the son of a Saudi construction magnate, during the US-

instigated war against the pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Islamist mujahideen fighters were funnelled across the Pakistani border into Afghanistan to serve as US proxies against the Soviet Union.

These Islamist groups were able to garner some measure of support among the most impoverished workers and rural toilers in the region by exploiting the social discontent of broad layers of the population in the Middle East, largely as a result of the failure of the secular nationalist regimes and parties—often allied with Moscow’s Stalinist regime—to improve the social and economic conditions or achieve any meaningful independence from imperialism.

The relationship between Washington and al-Qaeda and similar Sunni jihadi groups—characterised by their religious fanaticism, commitment to capitalism, virulent anti-communism and violent hostility to Shia Islam, Shia-majority Iran, and Alawites, the community to which Assad belongs—has repeatedly mutated from ally and proxy force to arch-enemy and back again, with all the accompanying lies and hypocrisy, as circumstances required.

Al-Jolani/al-Shara’a and the origins of HTS

Al-Jolani was born in 1982 to a middle-class Syrian family in Saudi Arabia and brought up in an affluent area of Damascus. His father’s cousin, Farouk al-Shara’a was a longtime foreign minister and then vice president of Syria until 2014.

After the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, al-Jolani went to Iraq and joined the Sunni insurgency against the US occupation led by al-Qaeda. Captured by US forces in 2006, he spent the next five years in prisons in Iraq.



Mugshot of Syrian militant Abu Mohammad al-Jolani after his 2006 capture by U.S. forces in Iraq [Photo: U.S. Dept. of Defense, likely Central Command - Taken after his 2006 arrest by U.S. forces; published by Rewards for Justice and PBS Frontline]

When the protests against Assad erupted in 2011, he moved back to Syria to set up the al-Nusra Front on behalf of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the then leader of Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), an offshoot of al-Qaeda formed in 2004 that later incorporated a number of Sunni insurgent factions in Iraq. The aim of the al-Nusra Front was to unify the various Salafi jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda and ISI groups, overthrow the Syrian regime and create an Islamic state. The following year, the UN designated the al-Nusra Front a terrorist group.

There then followed more than a decade of mergers, splits and lethal conflicts with other jihadi groups—amid efforts to win broader support, particularly from the US and Turkey—by distancing itself from some of its former allies and more abhorrent practices.

The al-Nusra Front won some early successes against Syrian regime forces, particularly in northwest Syria—in Aleppo, Hama, Lattakia, and Idlib—leading al-Baghdadi to call for the expansion of ISI into Syria under the broader mantle of Islamic State. But the factions soon clashed—killing thousands—as they competed for fighters in Syria. In April 2013, al-Jolani released a recorded message breaking with IS and stating, “The sons of al-Nusra Front pledge allegiance to Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri,” Osama bin Laden’s successor as leader of al-Qaeda—following the latter’s assassination in 2011—who provided fighters, arms and money.

The militias linked to al-Qaeda, which included Islamist fighters from Turkey, Iraq and Libya as well as from Chechnya and China’s Xinjiang region, dominated the anti-Assad forces. They became the biggest beneficiaries of the CIA’s near one-billion-dollar annual budget for the mission to topple the Assad regime, despite CIA claims that its arms and funds were going to “vetted” and “moderate” Syrian “rebels.”

When the dominance of the Islamic State (ISIS)—which the US and its allies had made the main force fighting for regime change in Syria—began to threaten US interests as it spread from Syria into northern Iraq in 2014, Washington switched horses and made the Syrian Democratic Forces, of which the US-backed Kurdish nationalist People’s Protection Units (YPG) are the backbone, its main proxy force.

When the US began its campaign against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, al-Jolani described the US air strikes as an assault on Islam and said he would fight the “United States and its allies,” including taking the fight to Western countries, and urged his fighters not to accept help from the West in their battle against the Islamic State.

In 2015, he switched tack and denied that al-Nusra had any plans to attack Western countries, saying it was focused on fighting the Assad regime, its allies Hezbollah, and ISIS.

In 2016, the al-Nusra Front split with al-Qaeda, renaming itself Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS), although it suffered disaffections in doing so, before merging the following year with four other Salafi jihadist armed groups to form HTS. The US insisted it was still an al-Qaeda affiliate and characterized the HTS as an attempt to “hijack the Syrian revolution” not a move toward moderation, designating it a global terrorist organisation.

Its force, made up of about 10,000 fighters, went on to bring most of the other Islamist factions under its leadership. HTS gained control of about half of Idlib province and neighbouring areas and became the dominant force in the region via a mix of ruthless violence and political coercion. It received considerable support from Turkey, which has deployed troops in the province and used HTS and other Islamist militias against Kurdish forces that, with US backing, had set up an autonomous enclave in north-east Syria. Turkey aims to prevent the creation of a Kurdish state on its southern border and the growth of separatist sentiment among the large Kurdish population within Turkey itself.

Ankara, which controls several provinces in northwestern Syria, has intervened both by directly supporting the Syrian National Army (SNA), the successor to the former Free Syrian Army (FSA), and by backing HTS, despite recognising it as a terrorist organisation. Since 2016, Turkey has carried out several military interventions in Syria.

Following ceasefire agreements struck with Russia and the Assad regime in 2018, HTS forces and their allies, including 2 million displaced from other parts of Syria, were evacuated to Idlib. That province, now home to 4.5 million people, became the last redoubt of Washington’s al-Qaeda-linked Islamist militias that formed the spearhead of its war for regime change. Its rule became synonymous—as described by human rights organisations and the UN Human Rights Council—with torture, disappearances, public stonings, summary executions, imprisonment, and severe repression of any form of dissent in areas under the control of HTS gunmen.

Washington rehabilitates HTS

None of that stopped Washington from trying to rehabilitate HTS, signalling that once again al-Qaeda had its uses in Syria where the Assad regime, with support from Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, had maintained its grip on power. HTS offered its services to the US, clashing with ISIS cells in Saraqeb and Jisr al Shughur, both in Idlib province. When ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi was killed by the US military in Idlib province in 2019, HTS welcomed his death.

In February 2021, Public Broadcasting Service’s (PBS) *Frontline* programme conducted an extraordinary interview with al-Jolani in Idlib province aimed at whitewashing HTS’s crimes

in Syria. PBS gave him the opportunity to distance himself from his past affiliation with al-Qaeda. Al-Jolani stressed HTS's role in fighting the Assad regime. Its mission, he said, was "defending the people, defending their safety, their religion, their honour, their property and standing against a criminal tyrant like Bashar al-Assad."



Jolani with *Frontline's* Martin Smith [Photo: Middle East Observer/X]

He portrayed himself as Washington's natural ally, pledging no support for any attacks against the US and denouncing the terrorist designation attached to himself and HTS as "unfair" and "political". He declared, "Through our 10-year journey in this revolution, we haven't posed any threat to Western or European society: no security threat, no economic threat, nothing." Given the opportunity to deny the widespread charges of violent suppression of any form of dissent in Idlib, al-Jolani accused those who made such charges of being "Russian agents" or "regime agents."

In the same programme, James Jeffrey, a former Middle East envoy in the Trump administration, confirmed that al-Jolani and the HTS were a US "asset" in Syria. "They are the least bad option of the various options on Idlib, and Idlib is one of the most important places in Syria, which is one of the most important places right now in the Middle East."

The following year, when ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi was killed in a US military raid in Idlib, other Islamist groups accused HTS of collaborating with the US, although HTS formally condemned the US operation.

Since taking control of Damascus, HTS has continued to demonstrate its loyalty to its paymasters in Washington.

It is striking that HTS leaders thanked Israel for its help by neutralising Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Al-Shara'a has issued no condemnation of Israel's seizure of the demilitarised zone

between Syria and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights—established by a 1974 ceasefire agreement with Syria—and the displacement of villagers in Quneitra province, in violation of international law. Neither has it said anything about the hundreds of Israeli airstrikes that have destroyed Syrian military bases, air defence systems, ammunition depots, surface-to-surface missile stockpiles and Syrian naval vessels, or the more than 75 US air strikes, breaching Syria’s sovereignty. Israel claims to have destroyed 80 percent of Syria’s military installations, as part of its efforts to strip the country of any defensive capability.

Instead, al-Shara’a said that having secured its interests through air strikes, Israel could now leave Syria in peace. He told Britain’s *Times* newspaper, “We do not want any conflict, whether with Israel or anyone else, and we will not let Syria be used as a launchpad for attacks [against Israel].” When the UK’s *Channel 4 News* tried to press an HTS spokesman about Israel’s attacks on Syria, his response was, “Our priority is to restore security and services, revive civilian life and institutions and care for newly liberated cities.”

HTS has vowed to keep Iran and Hezbollah—the Shiite “axis of resistance” against Israel—out of Syrian territory.