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Julani in a suit:

How France turned a pariah into a partner

Syria's interim President Ahmad Sharaa's rise is less a redemption arc than a calculated western project – with France seeking to outmaneuver Russia and reclaim its colonial stake in Syria.

Just a week before his landmark [meeting](#) with US President Donald Trump in Riyadh – the first encounter between American and Syrian leaders in 25 years – Syria's self-appointed transitional president, Ahmad al-Sharaa, arrived in Paris.

Sharaa's visit to the French capital, his [first to a western nation](#) since assuming power, was meticulously orchestrated. France extended a cautious welcome, limiting reception protocols and refraining from high-level state honors, signaling its intent to assert influence over the Syrian file without fully legitimizing a leader still listed on international terrorism watchlists. The visit, which required a UN-sanctioned waiver of travel bans for Sharaa and his delegation, culminated in a carefully managed meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron at the Élysée Palace. Macron's [press conference](#) afterward struck a sharp tone, insisting that meaningful changes in the Syrian file remain a prerequisite for international engagement.

France's calculated hospitality reinforced its ambitions to reclaim influence in Syria. For Sharaa, the trip was a strategic move to project international legitimacy and bury the hardline legacy of his past, including leadership ties to both [Al-Qaeda and ISIS](#).

France's investment in division

Sharaa – better known as Abu Mohammad al-Julani – has spent nearly a decade reinventing himself. After severing ties with Al-Qaeda in 2016 and rebranding the Nusra Front as Hayat

Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Julani began selling a more palatable image to international players. Qatari media led the narrative change while Turkiye facilitated much of his rise, allowing him to dominate Idlib in northwest Syria without major external funding.

France, meanwhile, had already begun recalibrating its Syria strategy. In 2017, the French Foreign Ministry commissioned a policy paper from its CAPS think tank advising on a stake in a post-Assad Syria. The recommendation: support reconstruction in areas outside former president Bashar al-Assad's control – including those under “radical” forces like HTS – as a hedge against Damascus's resurgence.

The ousted Syrian president has previously placed blame on France for its role in supporting terrorist groups in Syria during the crisis that started in 2011. “France has been the standard bearer of support for terrorism in Syria since the early days of the conflict,” he [told](#) journalists in 2017.

French policy hinged on one core idea: prevent reunification under Assad by consolidating de facto zones of control. Paris began discreetly funding civil initiatives in areas controlled by Julani – while the US still had a \$10 million bounty on his head – and revived intelligence contacts to address the presence of [over 600 French nationals](#) fighting alongside HTS and other militant factions.

While these ties remained largely covert, Julani spent years consolidating his grip on local factions, including foreign contingents. That groundwork laid the foundation for broader western engagement.

Sharaa's global debut

In February 2020, Julani made his first international play. The International Crisis Group, then led by Robert Malley, published a wide-ranging [interview](#) in which Julani called for HTS's removal from global terror lists. Malley, later former US President Joe Biden's Iran envoy, privately urged the White House to open channels with the group.

The former Al-Qaeda leader's message was unmistakable: HTS posed no threat outside Syria. A few months later, HTS's chief jurist, Abdul Rahim Atoun, echoed that line in *Le Temps*, claiming the group sought international aid, not confrontation. It was a quiet nod to France's ongoing policy of engagement with non-Assad-controlled regions.

Then came the image shift. Western journalists, including PBS's Martin Smith, met Julani, who this time donned a suit and tie. It was the [debut of a new persona](#): not a militant commander, but a national leader.

Behind the scenes, Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani – then operating under the alias Zaid al-Attar – brokered HTS's transformation. In 2017, Shaibani held backchannel meetings with

western intelligence figures, including former British diplomat [Jonathan Powell](#), known for negotiating with sanctioned groups.

Ukraine and the French pivot

Russia's war in Ukraine accelerated France's recalibration in Syria. Seeking to pressure Moscow – whose forces maintain strategic military footholds in Latakia and Tartous – Paris turned to its long-standing, [colonial-era](#) connections as a lever to reassert influence in the region.

While direct support for HTS attacks on Russian targets remains unconfirmed, the group's drone strikes in 2024 – particularly on the Kuweires Airbase – were closely followed by French diplomatic overtures. Macron's private demands to Sharaa reportedly included a Russian withdrawal from Syria.

France's parallel outreach to the US-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – designed to antagonize Turkiye – cemented its dual-track strategy: contain Assad's influence and hedge against Russia's hold over Syria.

Protecting minorities: France's leverage in Syria

When Sharaa stormed Damascus and took office, French and German foreign ministers rushed to Damascus in early 2025. France's Jean-Noel Barrot dedicated significant time to meeting Christian leaders, reviving France's colonial-era narrative of minority protection.

For Paris, safeguarding religious minorities remains a convenient entry point for intervention. Alongside Germany – eager to curb Syrian refugee flows – France offered gradual political and sanctions relief in exchange for reforms.

Sharaa responded with a technocratic cabinet, though HTS loyalists retained control of security ministries. Note that recent [massacres targeting Alawites](#) in Syria's coastal and central areas, in addition to sectarian conflicts between HTS-led security forces and the [Druze](#), have only accelerated France's engagement.

Border tensions with Lebanon added further justification. During his Élysée meeting with Sharaa, Macron brandished historic maps to aid in border demarcation and addressed his guest in unusually candid language, departing from protocol to signal authority.

A mutual harvest

France's renewed courtship of Syria's transitional government reflects years of slow cultivation. Julani, now rebranded in a suit as Sharaa, sold his moderation. Macron, seeking regional relevance, bought it.

The two sealed their alignment in a deal brokered with Washington: The SDF, long autonomous, will integrate into the nascent Syrian Ministry of Defense. If implemented, the

move will embed French influence deeper into Syrian state structures – and lend Sharaa’s presidency the institutional heft he has long sought.

For Israel, the alignment signals a potential bonus to the strategic and territorial gains it has made since Assad’s ousting: If the west is now openly backing Sharaa as a legitimate authority, [normalization](#) with Israel – a longtime distant prospect – edges a step closer to the realm of possibility.

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