CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

Syrian Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa *"Profile Assessment"*

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1. **Subject**: **Syrian Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa** *"Profile Assessment"*

2. **Purpose**: The aim of this paper is to provide an initial estimate of the likely trajectory of the Syrian government based on analysis of the public pronouncements over time of Ahmed al-Sharaa, the current president of the interim Syrian authority.

3. **Introduction**:
   a. **Background**
      1) Ahmed Al-Sharaa, also known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, was born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 1982 to a Syrian Sunni Muslim family from the Golan Heights who fled the region due to Israeli occupation during the Six-Day War (1967). His family returned to Syria in 1989, settling in Damascus. Al-Sharaa studied Medicine at Damascus University for two years.[i]
      2) In 2003, he joined al-Qaeda in Iraq. He was arrested by U.S. forces in 2010 and after one year of imprisonment he returned to Syria where he was tasked by al-Qaeda's central command to establish their branch. He founded Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Nusra Front) in 2012, which became al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate.[ii]
      3) In July 2016, al-Sharaa publicly dissolved Nusra Front and established Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (FTS), cutting ties with al-Qaeda. He later merged this group with others to form Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in 2017. Al-Sharaa has since sought to distance himself from transnational jihadist ideology, focusing on governance.[iii]
   b. **Al Sharaa governance of Idlib province**
      In 2017, he founded the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), which became the foundation of HTS's successful centralized technocratic governance model in Idlib. The SSG functioned as a quasi-state entity overseeing crucial sectors like education, healthcare, and reconstruction in Idlib, which became the fastest-growing region of Syria.[iv]

c. Al Sharaa (Post Assad period)

1) Internal Policy

Ahmed al-Sharaa has articulated a vision for a centralized and unified Syria, rejecting federalism as divisive and emphasizing state control over all military forces to ensure national cohesion. His intention is to achieve this through a multi-faceted approach:[v]

    i. Politically, al-Sharaa aims to foster national unity by launching a national dialogue that promotes reconciliation and transitional justice, with a focus on protecting minority rights and drafting a new constitution.[vi]

    ii. Militarily, he seeks to consolidate power by integrating all armed factions, into a single national army and advocating for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Syria.[vii]

    iii. Economically, al-Sharaa prioritizes rebuilding infrastructure, restoring public services, increasing public servant salaries, and advocating for the lifting of international sanctions to alleviate economic hardship and promote stability.[viii]

2) External (Diplomatic efforts)

Ahmad al-Sharaa has engaged in extensive diplomacy with Arab countries and the European Union. His strategic outreach aims to secure financial support for Syria's reconstruction and strengthen regional ties through discussions on border security and counterterrorism cooperation. With the EU, he seeks gradual recognition and support by engaging in discussions on political transition, security, and sanctions, while the EU emphasizes the need for an inclusive government that respects human rights and protects minorities.[ix] He has taken a strong stance against Iran and its proxies, closing the Iranian embassy and removing Iranian militias to curb their destabilizing influence in the region.[x] With Russia, al-Sharaa has adopted a more cautious approach. While emphasizing Syria's openness to all parties and maintaining "strategic ties" with Russia, his stance suggests a reluctance to fully commit as Assad did, indicating a desire to balance relationships with various international powers.[xi]

4. <u>General assessment:</u>

Ahmed al-Sharaa's history as a jihadist leader, including his roles in al-Qaeda in Iraq and the al-Nusra Front, raises significant doubts about his intentions. Past affiliations with extremist groups suggest a pattern of using violence to achieve political goals and radicalism. Despite his public rhetoric emphasizing inclusivity and minority rights, some reports highlight ongoing atrocities against Alawite communities under his leadership, indicating that sectarian violence persists which contradicts his proclaimed vision of unity and justice. Al-Sharaa's tendency to shift allegiances under pressure or opportunity, as evidenced by his breaks with ISIS and al-Qaeda, as well as his later rebranding of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), suggests that his alliances and ideological stances are driven by pragmatism rather than genuine conviction, making him an unreliable partner for international actors. On the other hand, one may argue that his intentions and steps in the current phase aim to stabilize Syria and build trust with regional and international actors. This approach is crucial for securing

support to overcome the transitional phase and legitimize his actions. Therefore, holding onto his previous ideologies as a member and leader of jihadist groups would conflict with his goals and ambitions going forward, which require him to abandon the mantle of jihadism and transform into a statesman.

5. **Conclusion:**

Ahmed al-Sharaa's evolution from militant leader to Syria's interim president reveals a complex figure whose commitment to regional stability remains questionable despite his public stance. His initiatives, such as closing the Iranian embassy, addressing violent militias in Syria, and negotiating a reduced Russian presence, potentially align with U.S. interests while creating opportunities for Western influence. However, his history of ideological adaptability suggests that his current overtures may be tactical rather than principled. Engagement should be approached with strategic caution, recognizing that his diplomatic maneuvers likely serve his own consolidation of power rather than reflecting a genuine ideological transformation. Any partnership should include concrete accountability measures while acknowledging the pragmatic opportunities his administration presents for regional realignment.

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xi   "Syria Leader Stresses 'Strong Strategic Ties' in Call With Russia's Putin", *The Moscow Times,* February 12, 2025 https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/02/12/syria-leader-stresses-strong-strategic-ties-in-call-with-russias-putin-a87973 (accessed on *March* 10, 2025).