

FT Magazine Ahmed al-Sharaa

The secret history of Syria's new leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa

Is the man once known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani intent on moderating or a brutal strongman?

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More than a decade had passed since Ahmed al-Sharaa squeezed into the narrow lift that went up to his parents' 10th-floor apartment. The Soviet-style block hadn't changed much since he last saw it. It still overlooked a series of identical concrete buildings and the weed-ridden patches that separated them. The hallways were the same shade of greying white they had been when he was a boy, although they were showing signs of wear after years of civil strife and economic crisis.

Sharaa had arrived in Damascus a few hours earlier, a conqueror leading a rebel army into a capital already overrun by his allies. Forces loyal to Syria's dictator Bashar al-Assad had melted in the face of their advance, leaving Sharaa to bloodlessly waltz into power on a biting cold Sunday morning in December 2024.

Once there, Sharaa's first stop had been a grassy knoll, where he prostrated himself to God, a gun poking out of his waistbelt as he lowered his forehead to the ground. The moment was captured on film and widely distributed, confirming Damascus had fallen. Then, cameras still in tow, Sharaa went to the city's historic Umayyad mosque to announce that, after 14 years of war, Assad's era was finally over.

These were victorious moments meant for public consumption. Sharaa's trip across town to the old apartment in the neighbourhood of Mezzeh was not. He returned home without cameras or much of an entourage, just a few bodyguards. By then, many residents of the capital had fled for the relative safety of the coast. But others were packing up in a frenzy, as armed men in mud-spattered cars flooded the city.





People celebrate Assad's defeat in Damascus, December 13 2024 © Emin Ozmen/Magnum Photos

Stepping off the elevator in his military greens, Sharaa knocked on the front door of the flat. The Suleiman family had only recently moved into the apartment after it had been assigned to them by the Assad regime. Now, they were throwing belongings into boxes and bags, trying to leave as quickly as possible.

They were startled to see the man who had become Syria's de facto leader. "Sharaa gently told them, 'Don't rush. Take your time. But this is my family's house, and we have many memories here, so we'd like it back now,'" an associate of Sharaa's said, in an account later confirmed by a neighbour. Sharaa didn't raise his voice and "gave them ample time to pack up and leave", the neighbour told me.

The upper-middle class, religiously mixed neighbourhood of Mezzeh features prominently in the landscape of Sharaa's childhood. It's where he played football as a boy, worked afternoons in his family's grocery store and endlessly debated politics with his father, mother and six siblings. It's also where they learnt he had abandoned his studies to go fight the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. By the time he returned, his family had long given him up for dead.

When Sharaa officially proclaimed himself [president of the new Syria](#) this year, it was the culmination of a campaign that had led him from the prison cells of Abu Ghraib in Iraq to the mountains of north-western Syria. Over the years, Sharaa had gone by several aliases and titles — commander, sheikh, brother. Until recently, he had styled himself al-Fatih Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, a nom de guerre reflecting his family's origins as well as his ambition (al-Fatih means "the conqueror"). The Islamist rebel group he has led since 2011, once an [al-Qaeda](#) affiliate, was known as Nusra before moderating and becoming Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS.





Bashar al-Assad portrait painted on the wall of the presidential guard headquarters, Damascus, December 13 2024 © Emin Ozmen/Magnum Photos

That means, for most of the past two decades, Sharaa worked in relative obscurity. Syrian intelligence services were unsure of his real name as late as 2016. That was also the year Sharaa revealed his face publicly for the first time. Until recently, he had only ever given one in-depth interview that touched on his past. The rest focused almost exclusively on his future. Sharaa did not respond to my numerous interview requests, but the few who have managed to ask him about his origins have received curt or intentionally evasive responses.

This is no accident, according to the more than 30 people I spoke with for this story, including current government officials, regional and western intelligence officers, former fighters, diplomats, friends and neighbours. Their accounts, as well as recovered intelligence documents and correspondence between jihadis, tell the story of a man who is acutely aware of how his back-story could be seen as at odds with the ideology of his rebel movement. The deeper one reaches into Sharaa's past, the clearer it becomes that this tightly managed obscurity not only allowed him to survive more than two decades of Islamist militancy. It helped him defeat Assad. And it may shape his ability to hold on to power once the goodwill of spectacular victory fades.

Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa was born in October 1982 in Saudi Arabia, where he spent the first seven years of his life. In a rare photograph of him as a child, found in a dossier compiled by Assad's intelligence services, Sharaa has the same unsmiling, enigmatic expression he is often seen wearing today.

Originally from Fiq, a district in what is now the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, the Sharaas were feudal landowners who, according to family lore, could trace their lineage back to the Prophet Mohammed. Sharaa's grandfather was a well-known merchant, who participated in an armed rebellion against French colonial forces in southern Syria. Sharaa's father, Hussein, followed in his footsteps, protesting the Ba'ath party's seizure of power, when he was still in secondary school. Hussein was jailed and eventually exiled to Iraq, where he attended university. By the time he returned to Syria several years later, the family had been expelled from Fiq by Israeli forces, forcing the Sharaas to live more modestly.

**As Sharaa neared
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Then came September
11**

Though he was opposed to the Assad dynasty, Hussein realised his ability to remain in Syria hinged on moderating his public vitriol. He got a job working for the state and dabbled in local politics but was blocked from advancing due to his past. For a time, he moved his young family to Saudi Arabia, where he worked at the oil ministry for a decade. He published several books

about the Gulf's oil economies, as well as polemics for regional newspapers.

After they moved back to Damascus, Sharaa's parents often reminded their five boys and two girls that, as children of a government official, they were expected to be paragons of discipline. According to neighbours and childhood friends, Sharaa and his siblings mostly lived up to these high expectations. Tall and lanky, teenage Sharaa was remembered by old friends and neighbours as extremely bright and soft-spoken, qualities still ascribed to him today.

Despite his family not being particularly religious, Sharaa was also known for being more devout than his friends. "We all used to pray, but he made it a point to go pray in the mosque," one of his childhood friends told me. (Sharaa's acquaintances asked me not to use their names.) "Our parents were so happy we had a religious friend. They would always say Ahmed's mind was more mature than his age, and they hoped it would rub off on us."



Aleppo, 2024 © Emin Ozmen/Magnum Photos

The person told a story about how, as a teenager, Sharaa once tried to help a wayward friend, who “was sort of getting into trouble and didn’t have much of a relationship with God”. Sharaa tried to convince the friend to go to Umrah, the lesser of the two Muslim pilgrimages in Saudi Arabia, “thinking it could help”. When the friend agreed, Sharaa raised the money needed to send him. Several people who knew Sharaa then emphasised his relationship to religion was far from extreme. He even attended the local Shafi’i mosque that the neighbourhood boys preferred because the imam there was less strict than others.

As Sharaa neared adulthood, though, the world around him shifted. He was almost 18 when the second Palestinian intifada began. Then came September 11 and America’s so-called war on terror. Those events led to a political awakening for many young people in the region, but particularly in Syria, where idealistic and restless young men like Sharaa were desperate for a cause.

About two weeks before bombs began falling on Baghdad in March 2003,

Sharaa made his way towards a row of unremarkable-looking buses in Damascus. Coaches had been lining up across the street from the US embassy, outside his local mosque and at the Damascus parade ground for weeks. They were filling up with volunteers from across the Arab world, heading to Iraq to take up arms against the US-led coalition.

Sharaa, who was 20 at the time, had decided to join them. He climbed aboard, surrounded by other hopeful would-be fighters, and within hours had crossed the desert into the country where he would spend much of the next eight years. “He disappeared overnight, and we never saw him again,” his childhood friend recalled.

Sharaa had come under the sway of an older friend at his mosque, himself moved by radical preachers whose influence grew as Washington pressed its case for invasion. Around this time, former Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal and several other operatives moved to Damascus and began attending the same mosque, which brought with it a harder-line Islamist bent, according to people who lived there at the time. Several of them claimed that, before he left, Sharaa had started wearing a jalabiya — a loose-fitting, ankle-length garment traditionally worn by men in rural areas — and that his beard got longer. Both could have been signs of a growing interest in Salafism, the fundamentalist revival movement within Sunni Islam.

Once they crossed the border, the recruits were welcomed by Iraqi soldiers loyal to Saddam Hussein, who gave them a few days of weapons training. They were still drilling when Baghdad fell. Syrian recruits were shocked to see Iraqis celebrating Saddam's fall, according to Hossam Jazmati, a Syrian jihadism expert, who suggests that for Syrians going to defend Iraqis, it must have been confusing to be confronted with such an outpouring.





View from Yarmouk camp, a district of Damascus populated by Palestinians, December 15 2024 © Emin Ozmen/Magnum Photos

Sharaa returned to Damascus soon after, but he was no longer welcome at home in Mezzeh, having fallen out with his father, according to Syrian intelligence documents. Instead, Sharaa was drawn into Islamist circles, just as the Iraqi insurgency began shifting from Ba'athist resistance to jihadism. When he eventually returned to Iraq in 2005, it was to join a Salafi jihadi organisation that eventually merged with al-Qaeda. Sharaa later explained that he wanted to understand “total war”, lessons from which he could bring back to Syria one day.

Many of those who knew Sharaa in Iraq have since died, disappeared or become too loyal to discuss his past without permission. He has discussed his time there and in al-Qaeda sparingly, probably because it is the most contentious part of his history for potential western allies. During a podcast interview in early February, Rory Stewart, a British ex-diplomat who backed the invasion of Iraq and worked for the coalition's provisional authority there, asked Sharaa about this period. He stubbornly avoided answering, leaving Stewart to remark how “strange” it was that they were meeting, given that they were once adversaries.

At the time, the nascent insurgency targeted UN officials, foreign embassies and Iraqi officials, killing and wounding scores of civilians. It also began targeting churches and Shia Muslim places of worship. Sharaa has insisted that he has never participated in actions that harmed civilians in Iraq. But experts and people who know him suggest that seems unlikely.

Only a few months into Sharaa's second tour in Iraq, he was picked up by US forces. Sharaa, who was using a false identity, passed a dialect test employed by Iraqi and American investigators to weed out the foreign jihadis. He then spent nearly six years passing through some of the country's most notorious prisons, including Abu Ghraib and Camp Bucca. Bucca is now famous for incubating a generation of influential jihadis, most notably future leaders of [Isis](#), including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Sharaa entered the detention system relatively low in the jihadi hierarchy. “He was a

minor figure,” said James Jeffrey, who served as US ambassador to Iraq before becoming a US special envoy for Syria from 2018 to 2020. “We had thousands of these guys.” Captivity exposed him to Americans. “You’re interrogated constantly. You will hear and you will see how they treat you. You will see their methods. You will study them,” Jeffrey said, referring to US troops. “It was a crucial experience.”

Sharaa was also steeped in the radical Islamists’ world, dominated by endless refining of positions and debating plans. As a result, he was able to get close to senior al-Qaeda figures. A fellow al-Qaeda detainee later wrote about Sharaa’s time in prison that “he read and studied a lot” but was very quiet. Soon, he would aggressively lobby them to expand into Syria.

In the middle of an August night in 2011, Sharaa and six other al-Qaeda operatives stole across the border from Iraq to Syria. The men had seen to their appearance, neatly trimming their beards to evade detection. Then they strapped explosives to their chests in case their evasions failed. It was a sweltering evening during the holy month of Ramadan, but the men crept through the desert, over fences and trenches that dotted the frontier. They were determined to help shape Syria’s future.

Sharaa had been released from prison several months earlier. Why or how exactly has never been clear. At the time, the Arab Spring had inspired mostly mild protests in Syria. Encouraged by the contacts he made while in detention, Sharaa had sent a letter to Baghdadi, pitching his more radical vision for Syria. Despite some in Baghdadi’s inner circle disapproving of Sharaa, he was one of few Syrians in the organisation at the time.

Sharaa asked for 100 men and enough money to begin spreading the movement. Only six of them joined him, including two Syrians, he has claimed, with Baghdadi providing \$50,000 to \$60,000 a month for six or seven months.

Sharaa has learnt much over the decades about the infinitesimal adjustments required

The two had a contentious relationship from the start. In a matter of two years, it would spiral into all-out war. Baghdadi died in 2019, when he self-detonated a suicide vest, as US special forces attempted to capture him. Sharaa has invariably described his former patron as unsophisticated and unimpressive, and has long condemned his

unimpressive, and has long condemned his

brutality. While these may sound like convenient claims to make today, letters I obtained and which were written by Isis operatives as far back as 2013 seem to support the idea that Sharaa and Baghdadi had significant ideological differences.

Still, Sharaa knew he needed Baghdadi's financing and network to succeed. In its early days, Sharaa's group of seven wasn't able to recruit effectively in Damascus. Then, they spread to the mountains of Idlib, a north-western province considered one of the most conservative parts of the country. Men began joining up, inspired by Sharaa's confidence. A year later, his force had grown to about 5,000 men. The cash from Baghdadi helped pay salaries and buy second-rate weapons.

In January 2012, Sharaa announced his group would be called Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham — Arabic for “the support front for victory of the people of the Levant” — in an eight-minute audio recording that made no mention of al-Qaeda. This was a calculated move to avoid alienating a Syrian public wary of Islamists. Before the year's end, Sharaa left Damascus and the woman he'd secretly married there, and was hopping between different Nusra-held territories in northern Syria. Several people who knew him at the time said he was highly disciplined, kept a low profile and had an eye for battlefield detail.

Nusra immediately earned a reputation for being the most effective, disciplined and skilled fighting force in the patchwork of Syrian rebel groups. It was also responsible for some of the most audacious and brutal attacks against regime forces. It helped draw recruits by filming many of its operations. “None of us were professional fighters, and we didn't always know what we were doing,” one former Free Syrian Army (FSA) commander in northern Syria around that time told me. “So when we shared a front line with Nusra guys, they would come in, take over an operation, execute it flawlessly and then disappear again. We called them ‘the ghosts’.”





An Assad poster at a military checkpoint near Hama, December 16 2024 © Emin Ozmen/Magnum Photos

Nusra was soon classified as a foreign terrorist organisation by Washington, which alleged it conducted 600 attacks in its first year of operation. These included at least 40 suicide bombings, as well as attacks with improvised explosive devices planted in city centres that killed civilians. Regional intelligence agencies at the time also attributed dozens of attacks on civilians to Nusra.

When the group eventually refined its operations to focus predominantly on military targets, it was because Sharaa came to see al-Qaeda techniques as toxic to many Muslims. “They were trying to build a base so they were not too aggressive with people,” said an Idlib-based journalist, one of few to have long covered Sharaa. He added that the group didn’t at first try to impose dress and behavioural codes in areas it took over. The FSA commander who fought alongside the group explained, “they were trying to influence rather than enforce.”

Nusra’s lingering problem was the rift between Sharaa and Baghdadi, which

had deepened over a range of issues. Baghdadi's worldview was predicated on the eradication of secular states, replaced by an Islamic state or caliphate. Sharaa needed to appear to adhere to that worldview in order to keep his hold on the foreign fighters in Nusra. But he also knew that Baghdadi's methods could not be copy-pasted in Syria, given the more moderate nature of popular opposition to Assad.

The official break came in 2013, after Baghdadi announced a plan to merge his group with Nusra. He hadn't consulted Sharaa, who quickly disavowed the move. But in order to maintain his legitimacy and retain his army of followers, many of whom were fighting for an Islamic caliphate and not necessarily for a free Syria, Sharaa pledged allegiance to a higher authority, al-Qaeda. Sharaa told Jerome Drevon, a jihadism expert and one of the authors of a forthcoming book on HTS, that he had "no other option . . . in order not to lose his men", a fact even Sharaa's opponents recognise.

Baghdadi unleashed a messianic campaign of violence, which only made Nusra look more moderate, imposing harsh dress codes and punishments for minor offences, making life intolerable for people in regions controlled by his group. Sharaa's fiercest fighters, attracted to Baghdadi's caliphate, began leaving Nusra and the two groups fought bitterly. That forced Sharaa to adapt and begin thinking of the role his group should play off the battlefield. He rebuilt Nusra's ranks over the next year and attempted to further ingratiate the group to locals. This meant everything from providing bakeries with fuel to distributing toys.





Children playing on the street in Damascus, January 9 2025 © Emin Ozmen/Magnum Photos

But Nusra's foray into governing wasn't exactly benign, according to numerous Idlib civilians, rival rebel factions and NGO workers. The group's foreign jihadis often treated locals more harshly than fellow Syrians, instilling widespread fear. They oppressed the minority populations that dot northern Syria. Nusra troops, particularly hardline foreign fighters, harassed Christian and Druze communities, who were no longer allowed to perform religious rites in public, had their land expropriated and, in some instances, were forced to convert to Islam or were killed. NGO workers were harassed and detained as foreign spies. Women and girls were pressured into dressing more conservatively, and some were made to leave their jobs as doctors and judges. Its courts imposed penalties, carrying out occasional executions in compliance with the ancient Islamic penal code for offences such as murder, extramarital affairs and apostasy, according to Drevon's research. Unlike Isis, however, Nusra avoided staging public executions.

As a result, the international community hardened its stance towards the group. Nusra was sanctioned by the UN, EU and western states, and Washington placed a \$10mn bounty on Sharaa's head. He retreated even further into obscurity. Few people knew where he slept; even fewer knew anything about his real identity. While Baghdadi seemed to revel in the spotlight, Sharaa recoiled from it.

Over the years that followed, Sharaa tended to his fragile military alliances and, when he could, decimated rebel groups perceived to threaten his dominance. He gained admirers and detractors in equal measure, earning a reputation for thoughtfulness and charisma as well as for double dealing and ruthlessness. "Sharaa had no problem spilling blood," said one allied fighter, who was formerly a rival, "as long as other solutions were attempted first."

Sharaa's ambitions eventually outgrew Nusra's limitations. Its designation as a terrorist organisation was a major impediment to expansion, making the leaders of other rebel groups wary of merging with it. In 2016, Sharaa cut ties with al-Qaeda entirely, in what is widely viewed as one of his most strategically adept moves. It was a tactical rebranding that allowed him to consolidate control. But it also required him to step out of the shadows.

Sharaa's own fighters, let alone the wider public, knew little about him. Up to that time, his important proclamations had come in the form of audio messages, leaked to

time, his important proclamations had come in the form of audio messages, leaked to the media. His minor edicts were communicated directly to his inner circle, who then spread the word. Sharaa was rarely ever seen. “He was this mythical creature . . . that people whispered about,” said the FSA commander. “We didn’t even know if he was Syrian.”

To announce the break with al-Qaeda, Sharaa appeared on video. This time, he was looking straight into the camera, dressed in military fatigues, with a white turban on his head and a long beard. An interview on Al Jazeera followed soon after. Back in Sharaa’s old neighbourhood, his childhood friends and neighbours were shocked. “He had the same face as the boy I was friends with, but Jolani was not a name familiar to any of us,” said the childhood friend. “We didn’t think it was him at first, especially because my friend was not some extremist radical. But he had the same mannerisms, the same voice. That’s when we knew.”

The journalists sitting in the remote Idlib mosque weren’t sure what to expect. It was 2019, and more than 40 of them had been summoned to meet an “important man” in Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the name Sharaa’s rebel group adopted after abandoning al-Qaeda. Since then, HTS had become the most powerful rebel group in northern Syria. With the support of Iran and Russia, Assad had retaken control of more than two-thirds of Syrian territory once held by rebels, but Sharaa had gained control of key areas, including a vital border crossing with Turkey. HTS had also created its own mini state in Idlib, with a government ostensibly led by civilians.

There were challenges — millions of displaced people, a stagnant economy, constant threats from Assad’s forces and the Russian air force. But by 2019, the fighting had lapsed into a stalemate of sorts, allowing HTS to focus on its government in Idlib. This was a public face for Sharaa’s group that could be made much more amenable to the international community.

At the mosque meeting, the journalists were stunned to see Sharaa walk in. In the previous year, he had been making more and more public appearances, almost like a campaigning politician. He made falafel at one local haunt and went to a market during the feast of Eid. Sharaa’s appearance had also changed. His beard was shorter and his choice of clothes depended on the context: civilian garb for meet and greets with the public, military dress for visits to the front line and traditional tribal clothes for religious or clan meetings.

Most of his interactions were now filmed, carefully edited and widely disseminated, in

a bid to humanise his movement to the millions of people now living under his group's control. Still, it was almost unheard of for Sharaa to attend, let alone orchestrate, a meeting with the press. Many of the journalists present resented Sharaa and HTS's excesses, and saw the meeting as a naked attempt to curry favour.

The journalists weren't shy in voicing their concerns, according to two people present. "They didn't like his project, didn't like his vision for the state, had questions about . . . how far he was going to extend his power," said the Idlib-based journalist who has followed Sharaa. "We felt he was creating a dictatorship like Assad's in Idlib, and we wanted to know who was really in control," the civilian government or HTS.

To their surprise, Sharaa listened quietly. He seemed unfazed by the criticism, allowing the group to air their grievances. When the meeting ended, he said: "I might not be able to convince you today as a group," the journalist recalled. "But I promise you, if I meet you one on one, you will all leave convinced of my viewpoint."

The meeting marked the beginning of a strategy that Sharaa would continue over the next few years. He met select analysts and researchers, current and former western officials, diplomats and advisers, and deepened HTS's relationship with Turkey.

In the first such meetings, Sharaa and his closest advisers read awkward and long statements that drove home the break with al-Qaeda. But eventually, "a dialogue emerged", said a former official who began meeting with Sharaa and his closest advisers around then. "We often discussed human rights, international law, protection of minorities and women. We often disagreed, but . . . if we discussed prisoners of war in one meeting, the next time, they'd have read up on the Geneva Conventions and showed a willingness to adapt their practices."

It is difficult to understand what is inside Sharaa's heart

Sharaa and HTS's softened image was the key to a change of heart in Washington, during Donald Trump's first presidency. Jeffrey, the former Syria special envoy, described how he began advocating a ceasefire to halt the regime and Russian bombardment of Idlib, arguing to then secretary of state Mike

Pompeo that Idlib could not fall under Assad's sway. His arguments eventually won, a case of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", he said, and a ceasefire was brokered in 2020 that saw an end to the fighting and allowed HTS room to breathe. Ultimately, Jeffrey said, "we saw no indication of any support for or conducting of international terrorist operations," as HTS and Sharaa were narrowly focused on Idlib and Assad.

Sharaa also began to reach out to communities his fighters had terrorised. After years of repressing local Christian churches, whose bells hadn't been permitted to ring since the Islamists arrived in northern Syria a decade earlier, Sharaa met with senior clergy in 2022. "He asked us to be patient, that we would get our rights back and ordered his men to stop harassing the Christians," said Luay Bechara, a senior priest with the Syrian Catholic church, who first met with Sharaa in a fish restaurant in a neighbouring village. "He told us that he personally did not have a problem with the presence of Christians in Idlib. But he asked us to give him time, because he needed to work on the extremists and get them to accept it."

While relations with Christians have improved and some confiscated land has been returned, they are still not allowed to openly worship in Idlib, an issue being closely monitored for indications of how Sharaa will treat the rest of the country's non-Muslims. According to several elders I spoke to, Druze minorities have not been afforded similar reparations for land occupied by HTS. The priest said it was difficult to understand what was inside Sharaa's heart, "but a person's actions demonstrate what they really think, and that's more important. He was very clear: if God lets me [bring down Assad], I have a vision for Syria which includes minority rights, the economy, international relations — everything."

Latifa al-Droubi was in a joking mood. Meeting with prominent Syrian-American women last month she quipped that, as far as she knew, "I was his only wife." Droubi was referring to Sharaa, her husband and father of her three children. As with the journalists in the mosque, her appearance at the meeting had been a total surprise. They knew Sharaa was seeking to reassure them he wouldn't restrict women's rights in the new Syria. But they did not expect to meet Droubi, about whom even less was publicly known.

While she wasn't photographed at the meeting, word quickly spread online about her appearance. Much was made of the fact that she wore a hijab, trousers and a jacket above the knee, rather than a face-veil or long black abaya. The implication, surely intentional, was that Sharaa was not an extremist.

Within a week, he was on his first overseas visit to Saudi Arabia, with Droubi at his side. This time, she was photographed wearing a long black abaya and a hijab without a face covering. The choice was also significant. It was standard for Umrah, where women are not allowed to cover their face, but would also appeal to the more hardline

elements of Sharaa's base. Two days later, Droubi had her first official photograph taken with the Turkish president's wife.

In many ways, the introduction of Sharaa's wife to the public offered a microcosm of all that he had learnt over the decades about the infinitesimal adjustments and balancing required to appeal to a coalition of vastly different factions. As the leader of all Syrians, that coalition now runs the gamut from the hardline jihadis who helped him rise to the secular liberals he cannot afford to alienate if he hopes to rule.

To many in the latter category, Sharaa has already made several mis-steps. When he announced himself president in January, he did so dressed in military garb in front of dozens of leaders of Syrian rebel factions who had helped bring down Assad. Some of them did not know why they had been summoned to the capital until they were called upon to rubber stamp his assent. That night, he did not publicly address the Syrian people.

Sharaa has barely done so since assuming power, only saying the word "democracy" in public once. He has shown little interest so far in expanding government beyond HTS members.



Celebrating the fall of the Assad regime in Homs, December 16 2024 © Emin Ozmen/Magnum Photos

Meanwhile, his government is working at a glacial pace, which those in Sharaa's orbit say has much to do with his centralised leadership style. Not quick to trust, he has restricted decision-making to a handful of his top lieutenants from Idlib, as well as his family. That includes his brothers Maher, currently health minister, and Hazem, an unofficial senior adviser. It also includes Anas Khattab, one of the six al-Qaeda men who crossed over from Iraq with Sharaa in 2011, who is now head of intelligence.

It is of little surprise to those familiar with Sharaa's years in Idlib. They remember the hardliners he has a tendency to put in power and the occasional brutality of his leadership purges. In 2023, for example, Sharaa threw many of his top lieutenants in jail, where they were tortured, triggering widespread protests. One of them — Abu Maria al-Qahtani, a key ally who also came from Iraq with Sharaa in 2011 — died last April, weeks after he was released from nearly a year in prison.

Many Syrians want Sharaa to succeed because the alternative is too bleak to ponder. But since arriving in Damascus, he has conducted hundreds of meetings with foreign officials, diplomats, civil society groups, businessmen, prominent members of the diaspora and others. He is taking advice from the analysts, officials and diplomats he's been meeting with for years in Idlib, as well as those hardliners that still populate his inner circle. Among dozens of people I've spoken to who've been in those meetings, including some who have long opposed Sharaa, the consensus has been optimistic until recently. He was repeatedly described to me as: "extremely bright", "cunning", "well-versed in regional history", "well-read", "a good listener" and, most frequently, "pragmatic". But, in recent weeks, another word has begun to creep in: "strongman".

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