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Cover photo: Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria's new president following the overthrow of the Assad regime // Photo credit: SANA.



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

The sudden collapse of the Assad regime in Syria and rise to power of Islamists marks a pivotal turning point in the regional landscape. The new government is headed by the former rebel group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which is led by Ahmed al-Sharaa, previously known by his *nom de guerre*, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. Before forming HTS, Al-Sharaa was a leading **Al-Qaeda commander in Syria** who had also fought in Iraq alongside radical figures such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. With his transformation into Syria's **head of state**, he represents a new model of post-Al-Qaeda Islamism and raises fundamental questions about the group's future direction.

Al-Qaeda's Global Brand: Facing an Uncertain Future

HTS' unexpected success in Syria, after spending years holed up in the northern province of Idlib, can be attributed to several factors, including external **support** from regional powers. But both during the war and now in government, the group has also demonstrated an exceptional ability to adapt to Syria's complex political and social environment by **forging broad alliances** with diverse factions, often transcending the traditional ideological boundaries of its predecessor, Al-Qaeda. In this way, Al-Sharaa was able to garner significant popular support, especially in areas ravaged by war, by positioning himself as a liberator rather than another oppressor. This strategy marks a departure from the rigid approach that Al-Qaeda and its various global branches have stuck to through thick and thin. Al-Sharaa's ascent also coincides with a period of significant decline for Al-Qaeda globally. The death of Osama bin Laden in 2011 and of his successor Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2023, and the grinding impact of constant international pressure on the organization, including drone attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen, could now compel Al-Qaeda's leadership to reassess its strategy.

HTS's success in Syria could inspire leading figures in various branches to seek new ways to survive and expand, or emulate Al-Sharaa's approach in setting aside global jihad to impact local politics. Will the organization undergo a strategic shift, adopting more flexible and adaptable approaches to local contexts, or will it adhere to its traditional ideology, regardless of the cost? Moreover, which Al-Qaeda branches are most likely to be influenced by this model? In the aftermath of Syria's stunning turnaround, these are the most pressing questions for the group.

AQAP in Yemen: Could Al-Sharaa be an Inspiration?

Al-Sharaa's flexible model emerged from a period of intense rivalry between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group (ISIS) and deep disagreement over the brutality of the latter and the Al-Qaeda branch in Iraq from which it emerged. ISIS declared its caliphate in 2014 after breaking away from Al-Qaeda, prompting Al-Qaeda to reassess many of its tactics in an attempt to differentiate itself.

In Yemen, for example, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) abandoned many of the tactics for which ISIS became notorious, such as public beheadings. AQAP has also disavowed attacks on Shia **mosques** and other sectarian acts focused on exploiting social and religious divisions. These shifts in AQAP's strategy were a direct response to the widespread criticism leveled against ISIS and the perception that excessive violence was destined to erode public sympathy.

Al-Sharaa's model in Syria represents a new paradigm for Al-Qaeda that combines ideological rigor with tactical flexibility. Al-Sharaa achieved significant gains on the battlefield by adopting unconventional strategies, such as forging alliances with groups outside HTS's ideological sphere and presenting himself as the liberator of the Syrian people. Similarly, AQAP's direct involvement in popular **resistance** against the Houthis represents a significant strategic shift in the organization's approach. In 2014, the group threatened attacks inside Saudi Arabia. Having previously viewed the kingdom as an arch-enemy alongside the United States, AQAP recalculated and joined forces with anti-Houthi factions backed by Riyadh. Al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen has acknowledged its involvement in battles against the Houthis on **11 different fronts**, underscoring the magnitude of this shift. According to one former jihadist, Al-Qaeda opted to cooperate with its adversaries to confront the greater threat it perceived from the Houthis, which it saw as a challenge to its own ideology.

AQAP has since shifted positions in Yemen again under the new leadership of **Saad al-Awlaqi**, making the government and UAE-backed southern separatists its main targets. The group is clearly capable of consolidating relationships with other factions and cooperating against what it perceives as a common enemy.

Al-Sharaa's success in Syria demonstrates that similar groups might also possess the ability to adapt and evolve in response to emerging challenges. The Syrian model is likely to spark a wide-ranging debate within Al-Qaeda about its future and may prompt leaders to reassess their strategies. This could produce fundamental changes in the group's nature and aims in the Gulf region.

Somalia's Al-Shabaab: The Branch Most Likely to Change?

The Al-Shabaab group in Somalia is the branch of Al-Qaeda perhaps most likely to follow the HTS model. It is currently the most powerful branch of the organization, controlling large areas of Somalia via an autonomous administration. "Al-Shabaab has been seeking for some time to talk to the United States, similar to Washington's past consultations with the Taliban in Doha that resulted in the complete withdrawal of the US army from Afghanistan and the group's subsequent assumption of power," said Amjad Khoshafa, a Yemeni researcher. "Al-Shabaab views the Taliban experience as one it can emulate to consolidate its power in Somalia. It also envisions an effective Qatari mediation role."

Still, HTS may be seen by some extremist groups as having gone too far, offering too many concessions to Western liberalism in return for meager political and economic gains. Attempts by Al-Qaeda leaders to blur ideological lines and change organizational structures will run some risk of stoking internal tensions and creating a backlash. In such a scenario, branches in Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere might revert to their ideological underpinnings to avoid internal crises.

The United States, too, will face some stark choices. If current strategies are deemed as having failed in recent years, Washington may be minded to reassess its options on the counterterrorism front. Positive signals from Al-Qaeda could prompt interest in foreign policy, security, and defense agencies in new strategies of recognition and integration.

Conclusion

Al-Sharaa has arguably shown more strategic flexibility in Syria than the leader of any other jihadist organization since the 1980s. Through his ability to adapt to local contexts and forge alliances that transcend ideological nuances, HTS was able to make significant gains on the ground that culminated in the overthrow of the Assad regime.

HTS's extraordinary success amid the challenges facing Al-Qaeda at the local and global levels could now prompt Al-Qaeda's leaders to reassess their strategies. However, any rapid and fundamental transformation could also be met with internal resistance and sow divisions, threatening the group's cohesion and existence in its various local operating environments.

Further, external factors should not be underestimated. For all his innovative approaches and skill in managing jihadist politics, Al-Sharaa and HTS were unlikely to survive or succeed without the help of actors such as Turkey and Qatar. For Al-Qaeda's other branches, any hope of emulating Al-Sharaa will require careful attention to the regional actors that dominate their worlds.

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This analysis is part of a series of publications produced by the Sana'a Center and funded by the government of the Kingdom of The Netherlands. The series explores issues within economic, political, and environmental themes, aiming to inform discussion and policymaking related to Yemen that foster sustainable peace. Views expressed within should not be construed as representing the Sana'a Center or the Dutch government.



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