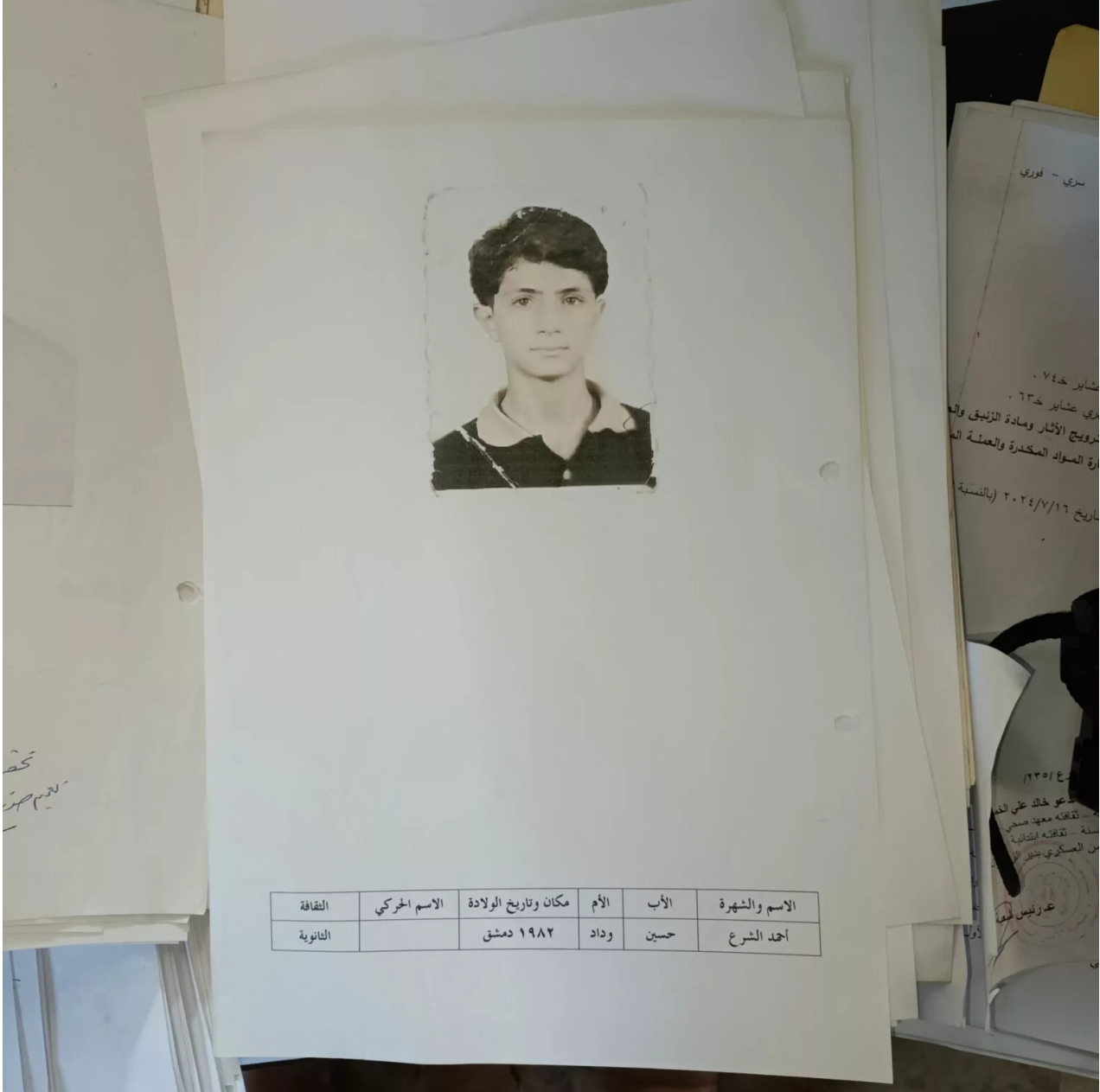


From al-Jolani to Ahmad al-Shara: The Evolution of Syria's New Leader



Ahmad al-Shara returned to his beloved city, Damascus, on December 8th of last year, after years of absence imposed first by the US occupation of Iraq and later by his dramatic involvement in the fight against Bashar al-Assad's regime. Upon his arrival, overcome with emotion, he knelt in prayer in a public park, thanking God.

He then embarked on a tour of the capital, revisiting its streets and landmarks, reliving memories of the past. That afternoon, he capped his visit with a stop at the Umayyad Mosque. Breaking with the usual conventions of leadership

appearances, he chose not to ascend the pulpit to address the crowds. Instead, he delivered an impromptu speech from the mosque's mihrab.

In his address, he congratulated the Syrian people, offered prolonged praise to God, recalled the suffering of the oppressed, and lauded the sacrifices of heroic fighters. As those around him chanted "Allahu Akbar" and snapped selfies, al-Shara remained calm, delivering a powerful message:

"This victory, my brothers, marks a new chapter in the history of the entire Islamic nation. I advise all nations: if a right is lost, never stop demanding it until it is restored."

This was no ordinary moment. It symbolized not just the collapse of decades of Assad regime dominance, but also a pivotal turning point in the trajectory of jihadist movements in the Arab world. The reemergence of Abu Muhammad al-Jolani (as he was formerly known) suggested that a new chapter was unfolding—one that could redefine the strategic thinking of these movements and reinvigorate their role within their societies and the broader region.

Ahmad al-Shara stands out in the jihadist current. He succeeded in building and leading the most enduring and influential jihadist movement of the Syrian revolution. This success was not accidental, but rather the product of years of adaptation and strategic evolution—ranging from jurisprudential grounding to political and military tactics.

This report delves deep into the persona of Ahmad al-Shara, aiming to answer key questions: Who is he? What are his core ideas and worldview? How did these develop? We will also explore his defining leadership traits, examine the likely scenarios for Syria under his rule, and assess his impact on the future of jihadist currents in the region.

His Roots: From Golan to Damascus

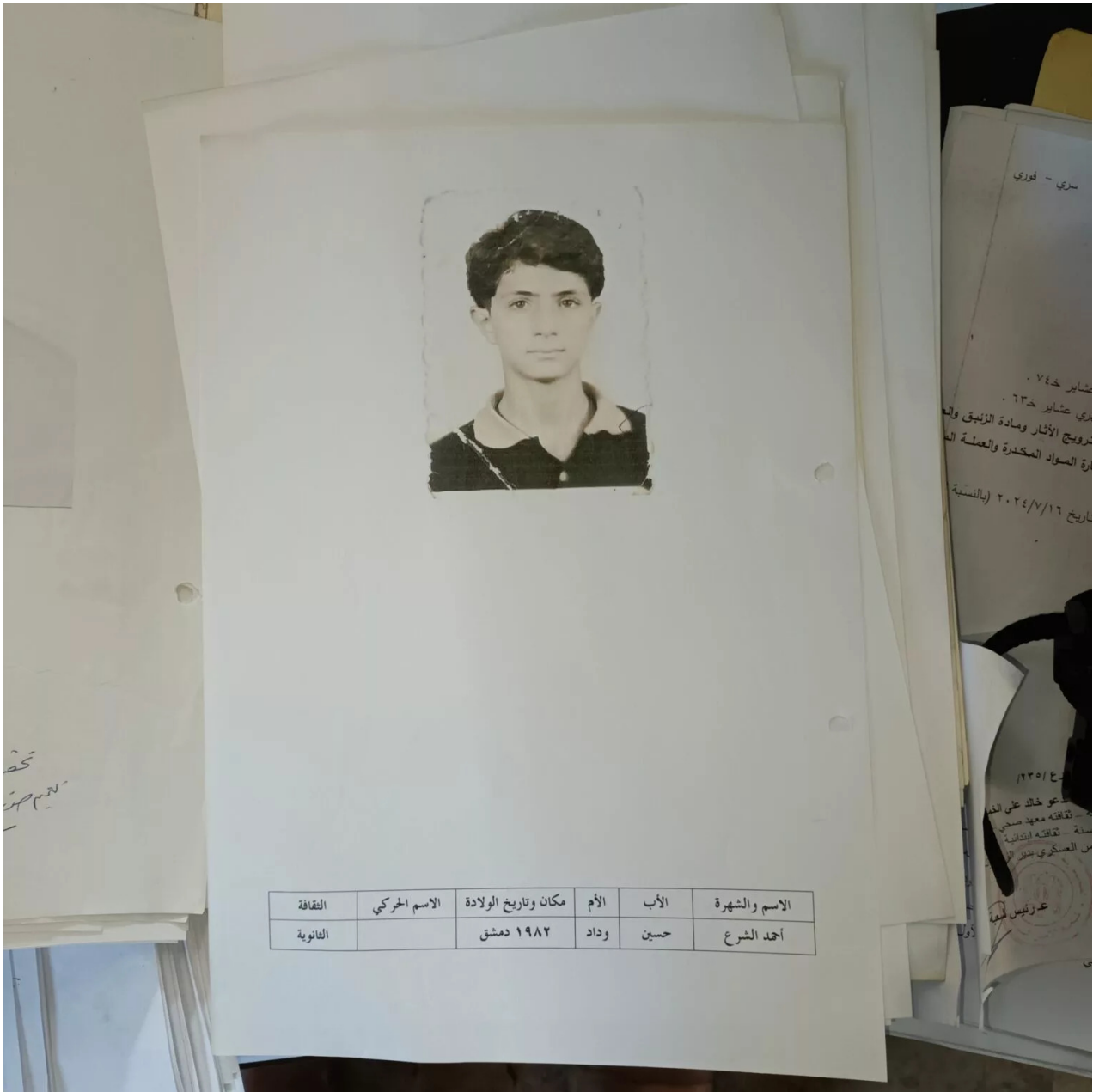
Ahmad al-Shara hails from a distinguished Arab family originally from the village of Jibeen in the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan. Historically, the family made its mark in diverse arenas—from academia and commerce to political activism. According to Dr. Hussein al-Shara, Ahmad's father, the family played a significant role in the Syrian revolt against French colonialism in the early 20th century, a resistance that came at great cost—executions, displacement, and the loss of their wealth due to colonial repression.

Just one year after Syria gained independence, Hussein al-Shara was born in the southern Golan town of Fiq. But in 1967, following Israel's seizure of the Golan Heights, the family was forced to flee. They settled in the Mezzeh district of Damascus, beginning a new life fraught with hardship.

Hussein al-Shara was a political activist and a vocal critic of the Syrian regime. After graduating from the University of Baghdad with a degree in economics and political science, his views led to mounting pressure, prompting him to move to Riyadh where he worked as an economic researcher.

It was there, in 1982—a year marked by the Hama massacre—that Ahmad al-Shara, later known as Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, was born.

In 1989, following an improvement in their financial circumstances, the al-Shara family returned to Damascus. Ahmad grew up in a middle-class environment in Mezzeh's upscale Eastern Villas area. Although his father instilled a strong sense of political consciousness—particularly Arab nationalism—Ahmad's vision later expanded to a broader Islamic perspective, focusing on the entire Muslim ummah. This ideological divergence became a point of contention between father and son.



A teenage photo of Ahmad al-Shara, taken from official records listing his full name, parents, and birthplace in Damascus in 1982.

Despite a formal education in Damascus, it was not the school system that shaped Ahmad's religious identity. Rather, his Islamic awakening began in mosques—particularly the al-Shafi'i Mosque near his home. There, he was exposed to Palestinian Islamic figures, notably members of Hamas, and developed close ties with the mosque's imam. This spiritual environment played a critical role in shaping his personality and worldview.

Unsurprisingly, one of al-Shara's first stops upon the liberation of Damascus in 2024 was al-Shafi'i Mosque—a powerful gesture underscoring his deep-rooted connection to the religious spaces that had molded him.

The late 1990s and early 2000s were turbulent years for the Arab and Muslim world, marked by the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Second Intifada, the Second Chechen War, and Ariel Sharon's incursion into al-Aqsa Mosque. These events ignited widespread anger and anti-American sentiment across the region.

Al-Shara was deeply affected by the Second Intifada at age 18. He viewed al-Qaeda's post-9/11 actions positively, believing it was the only force capable of confronting American hegemony in the region. His yearning to defend the oppressed sparked a personal transformation and a growing sense of religious duty.

Though he initially enrolled in Damascus University to study media, he abandoned his studies two years later, swept up by a powerful religious calling. With Syria then serving as a transit hub for jihadist recruits heading to Iraq, al-Shara joined the resistance against the American occupation.

In Iraq: Destiny or Ideology?

Al-Shara arrived in Iraq two weeks before the U.S. invasion in 2003. His early involvement was driven more by instinct than ideology, as he later admitted he was unaware of the nuanced ideological divisions among jihadist factions. He joined al-Qaeda's ranks believing he was defending Iraq's people.

Initially stationed in Baghdad, he moved to Ramadi before the war began. Upon returning to Syria in 2003, he was briefly detained by the intelligence branch 243 on suspicion of illegally crossing into Iraq, but was released after denying affiliation with extremist groups.

He later reentered Iraq, settled in Mosul, and took part in the 2004 battles. He joined a small jihadist cell that pledged allegiance to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, though he never met Zarqawi personally.

In late 2004, U.S. forces discovered his group and imprisoned him in Abu Ghraib under the assumption that he was Iraqi. He was later transferred between Camp Bucca and Camp Cropper, before being handed over to Iraqi authorities and incarcerated in Taji prison. He spent nearly five years in detention, until his release in 2010.

Al-Shara's time in prison proved formative. He encountered a broad spectrum of Islamist ideologues and developed relationships with influential Iraqi jihadist leaders. Shocked by the extremist ideologies that had emerged in prison, he voiced private objections to some of Zarqawi's methods—particularly attacks on marketplaces and Shi'a religious sites—but refrained from publicly denouncing them.

Upon release, he rose through the ranks of the Islamic State in Iraq but never

lost sight of Syria. He once remarked: “Our bodies were in Iraq, but our hearts were in the land of al-Sham.” According to Abu Abdullah al-Shami, a cofounder of Ahrar al-Sham, al-Shara had been thinking about a Syrian project even before heading to Iraq.

He drafted a 50-page manifesto titled The Front for the People of al-Sham, drawing key distinctions between Iraq and Syria, and urging against repeating Iraq's mistakes. His proposal was sent to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who reportedly praised its depth and clarity.

The Birth of Jabhat al-Nusra

With the Syrian uprising gaining momentum, al-Shara met with Baghdadi and secured approval to establish a Syrian affiliate of al-Qaeda. Baghdadi reluctantly granted him half the group's monthly budget—around \$50,000 to \$60,000—and allowed six fighters to accompany him to Syria in August 2011.

Over the next year, al-Shara recruited some 5,000 fighters and formally announced the formation of Jabhat al-Nusra in January 2012. He began targeting Assad regime security centers across Syria. In his first audio statement—deliberately distorted to mask his identity—he referred to himself as al-Fateh (the Conqueror), referencing the conquest of Damascus.

Unlike traditional jihadist leaders, al-Shara did not call himself “Emir” but preferred the title “General Supervisor.” He sought cooperation with other anti-Assad factions, avoided early infighting, and focused on building grassroots support.



A protester holds a sign that reads: “We Are All Jabhat al-Nusra”.

His strategy paid off. When the U.S. designated Jabhat al-Nusra a terrorist organization in December 2012, many Syrian opposition factions rallied behind him, organizing protests under the slogan: “We are all Jabhat al-Nusra.”

Emboldened by popular support and battlefield success, al-Shara began distancing himself from al-Baghdadi's directives, refusing orders to attack Turkey or eliminate Syrian rebel commanders deemed apostates by the Islamic State. Sensing a loss of control, Baghdadi announced in April 2013 the unification of Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq under the new banner of Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)—a move meant to force al-Shara's compliance.

Some of al-Nusra's fighters defected to ISIS, prompting concern within al-Shara's ranks. Still relatively unknown within global jihadist circles, and without direct ties to Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Shara was unwilling to yield to Baghdadi. Seeking broader jihadist legitimacy, he renewed his allegiance to Zawahiri, positioning himself as the legitimate al-Qaeda representative in Syria.

According to Syrian analyst Hossam Jazmati, al-Shara had always aimed to lead an independent movement and only aligned with al-Qaeda to counter ISIS's influence. Zawahiri backed al-Shara, ruling in his favor and attempting to separate the two groups geographically. However, ISIS viewed Zawahiri's support as an endorsement of al-Shara's defiance, fueling a war of accusations and retaliations.

Tensions exploded when ISIS assassinated Abu Khalid al-Suri, Zawahiri's envoy to mediate between the factions. This act effectively ended any chance of reconciliation. Al-Qaeda officially disavowed ISIS in 2014, and al-Shara publicly condemned the group as traitorous, accusing them of attacking frontline fighters rather than the Assad regime.

Days later, he issued a statement defining Jabhat al-Nusra's unique methodology, asserting that they had no intention of mimicking ISIS. The rift grew deeper, with ISIS labeling al-Nusra and al-Qaeda as apostates allied with secular forces, while al-Nusra's leadership began openly branding ISIS as extremists and Khawarij—a historically condemned sect.

Throughout this period, al-Shara faced intense pressure. The United States designated Jabhat al-Nusra as a terrorist organization. Turkey was also critical, viewing him as an obstacle to the Western-backed opposition. As his group came under airstrikes from the US and Russia, and as ISIS gained territory, al-Shara began to suspect that Western and regional actors might be supporting factions to undermine him.

In response, he launched preemptive campaigns to eliminate these threats. In October 2014, Jabhat al-Nusra dismantled the Western-backed Syrian Revolutionaries Front, and in March 2015, it targeted the Hazzm Movement, which had received US support. Al-Shara viewed these groups as Trojan horses for foreign agendas.

Despite his militant posture, al-Shara refrained from advocating global jihad. While he occasionally echoed al-Qaeda's narratives—for instance, mourning the death of its Yemeni commander Nasser al-Wuhayshi—his operations remained focused on Syria. In a December 2013 interview with Al Jazeera's Taysir Allouni, he denounced the takfir (excommunication) of Syrian society. In a May 2015 interview with Ahmad Mansour, he reiterated that his primary mission was fighting the Assad regime and Iranian-backed militias.

By 2015, ISIS's entry into Syria and its brutality caused ideological soul-searching among jihadists. Many, including al-Shara, sought to differentiate themselves. In March of that year, al-Shara joined other Islamist factions in a military operations room. Proposals for a unified political-military body emerged, but Jabhat al-Nusra's ties to al-Qaeda remained a stumbling block.

For years, al-Shara resisted pressure to sever ties with al-Qaeda, despite growing internal and external demands. Eventually, the risk of isolation, foreign airstrikes, and being conflated with ISIS forced his hand. Without consulting Zawahiri, al-Shara dissolved Jabhat al-Nusra in a surprise move and rebranded the group as Jabhat Fath al-Sham in 2016—stating that it would focus solely on Syria.

Zawahiri's deputy in Syria, Ahmad Hasan Abu al-Khayr, supported the move, on condition that Zawahiri approve it. But Zawahiri later opposed the disassociation. His rejection exposed a significant rift, with many jihadists perceiving al-Shara's decision as a betrayal of their oath.

This split triggered a schism within al-Nusra. Veteran hardliners rejected the break and founded Hurras al-Din, al-Qaeda's new affiliate in Syria, in February 2018. But al-Shara systematically dismantled Hurras al-Din, reined in foreign fighters, and absorbed or crushed rival factions, using both co-optation and coercion.

Eventually, he consolidated military dominance over Idlib and established civil governance through Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). In June 2020, HTS banned the formation of new factions or military operations rooms, declaring that all armed activity would be coordinated through its "al-Fath al-Mubin" operations room. Having sidelined both al-Qaeda and ISIS, al-Shara emerged stronger than ever, ushering in a new phase in his ideological and political journey.

Vision and Pragmatism: Governing Idlib

With military dominance secured, al-Shara shifted focus to crafting a viable jihadist governance model rooted in local realities. He recognized that previous jihadist approaches—his own included—had failed to address Syria's socio-political complexities.

What distinguished al-Shara during this period was his pragmatism. He worked within available constraints, building civil institutions and a centralized governance framework aimed at long-term survival. HTS transitioned away from hardline Salafi doctrines, reframing many ideological absolutes as jurisprudential matters rather than creedal necessities.

This shift was mirrored in HTS's internal structure: religious hardliners were sidelined, and the group increasingly adopted policies grounded in legal realism (*fiqh al-nawazil*) and *maqasid* (objectives-based jurisprudence). These doctrinal tools were used to justify truces and dealings with adversaries, including secular actors and foreign powers.

HTS opened a political office to engage with international entities, attempted to reassure foreign governments about its local focus, and cultivated ties with humanitarian agencies and the UN.

Internally, al-Shara sought legitimacy by engaging directly with local communities. He prioritized outreach to tribal leaders, notables, and minorities, seeing them as key to building a sustainable support base. He visited wounded fighters, distributed gifts to orphans of martyrs, honored top university graduates, and attended local religious and civic celebrations.



Al-Shara's public appearances—shopping in Idlib's markets, taking selfies with residents—were calculated moves to humanize his image and portray himself as a people's leader. He also weighed in on economic issues, including the Turkish lira crisis and rising bread prices, and participated in emergency council meetings to address winter hardships in displaced persons camps.

In a striking departure from his earlier rhetoric, al-Shara began focusing on daily concerns over ideological purity. He advocated understanding local customs and acknowledged that only God holds the authority to declare things forbidden—a veiled critique of previous jihadist rigidity.

This contrasted sharply with his 2012–2016 discourse, which revolved around enforcing divine sovereignty (hakimiyya) and establishing an Islamic state governed by strict Sharia. Now, al-Shara emphasized coexistence, restraint, and gradualism. In a 2022 public meeting, he stressed the need to avoid past mistakes and affirmed that imposing ideology in wartime would alienate conservative Syrian society.

His pragmatism drew ire from hardline ideologues like Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who accused him of sacrificing Salafi principles for political expediency. HTS eventually banned Maqdisi's writings and publicly disavowed him, accusing him of being closer to Khawarij extremists than mainstream Islam.

The Future of Ahmad al-Shara

Al-Shara's political doctrine has evolved in response to the unique context of the Syrian revolution and its surrounding geopolitical pressures. His positions reflect deeply held convictions forged through experience, not mere tactical shifts.



Ahmad al-Shara appears in a formal suit during a public event in Damascus, reflecting his shift from militant commander to political leader.

Unlike the chaos following ISIS's rise, al-Shara managed to seize and govern territory with minimal international backlash. His future path appears anchored in pragmatic realism—balancing ideological commitments with survival imperatives.

Military analyst Ammar Farhoud believes that regional and international dynamics will heavily influence al-Shara's decisions. Despite his flexibility, al-Shara remains uncompromising on certain issues—especially regarding Iran, which he continues to view as a sectarian threat to Sunnis in the region. Following Assad's fall, he linked Syria's liberation to the broader Sunni struggle, underscoring his belief in an existential sectarian conflict.

Yet, his aspiration to build an Islamic state remains. In a 2022 address to graduating military cadets, he promised that a fully liberated Syria would pave the way for justice under divine law.

Though he rarely details a concrete post-war political model, al-Shara sees Islam as the most viable system of governance. His approach diverges from traditional jihadist visions, opting instead for a more localized, gradual path.

HTS continues to issue statements supporting Gaza during Israeli offensives, but

such stances reflect only part of al-Shara's worldview. His broader focus lies in confronting perceived threats to Muslim interests and ensuring local governance remains under HTS control.

Ahmad al-Shara is neither hero nor villain. Reducing him to a caricature—whether as a savior or a tyrant—fails to grasp the complexities of his journey. His success reflects strategic acumen that is reshaping the jihadist movement in real time.

The central challenge ahead lies in navigating foreign interventions and forging balanced alliances with neighboring powers amid Syria's crowded and competing interests.

Key questions remain: Will global Salafi-jihadist movements reorganize after years of decline? Could al-Shara's model become a blueprint for others? And what is the fate of global jihad after this rare experiment in local jihadist governance?

We may not have to wait long for answers. The current decade could very well witness the emergence of movements modeled on HTS—and the rise of another figure like Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, or rather, Ahmad al-Shara.