Enough with the Hand-Wringing: Al-Sharaa Is Better Than Assad

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Articles & Testimony

Despite well-founded worries about the rise of an Islamist government in Syria, the new rulers cannot be any worse than the previous regime—especially now that they are largely disarmed and disinclined to partner with U.S. adversaries like Iran and Russia.

During the presidency of George W. Bush, there was a debate in the administration about Syria's Bashar al-Assad regime. After 9-11, Rumsfeld's Pentagon, where I worked, believed the Assad regime was a terrorist-supporting strategic ally of Iran in possession of chemical weapons—a combination that should have qualified Damascus as a member of the "axis of evil." This view was further solidified after Assad started flooding Iraq with jihadists to kill American troops on the eve of the 2003 invasion. The Powell State Department and the CIA-detailed senior director for the Middle East at the NSC disagreed. While DOD saw Assad as irredeemable, State and NSC considered him as engageable. In any event, they argued, Assad was the "devil we know," and if his regime fell, what came next could be worse.

It was a maddening policy approach, but not without precedent. My mentor and boss, then Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs Peter Rodman, sympathized with my frustration. A Kissinger protege who had served in five Republican administrations, Rodman was familiar with this kind of cynical thinking. He told me the story of Averell Harriman, who while serving as US Ambassador to the UK in the 1940s famously said, "Stalin I can deal with; it's the hardliners in the Kremlin that scare me." Stalin, of course, is credited with killing over 20 million people.

Twenty years on, few are mourning the demise of the Assad regime. Bashar and his father Hafiz before him were murderous tyrants. In the last fifteen years of his rule, Bashar was particularly cruel to the Syrian people, filling the

regime's dungeons to the brim, killing over 500,000 mostly Sunni Muslim civilians, and forcing some 7 million Sunnis to seek refuge abroad. The killings and the deliberate policy of population transfer resemble—even if they don't completely meet the dictionary definition of—genocide and ethnic cleansing.

Notwithstanding the regime's sadistic tendencies at home and its proactive policy of destabilizing neighboring states abroad, there is a lot of hand-wringing about post-Assad Syria, and even some nostalgia—especially in the region—for the former dictatorship. To be sure, Ahmed al-Sharaa (nee Abu Mohammed al-Julani) has a well-documented and incredibly concerning felonious and terrorist past. Previously a Salafi jihadist member of Al-Qaeda and a loyalist of the Islamic State, Julani killed Iraqis, Syrians, and perhaps Americans, and he was correctly designated a terrorist. However, his more recent record has been less definitively malign.

In Idlib province, where Julani's Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) **governed for nearly eight years (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/age-political-jihadism-study-hayat-tahrir-al-sham)** before the revolution, Julani seemed to pursue a relatively more tolerant brand of Islamist rule. He broke with ISIS in 2013 and Al-Qaeda in 2016—and later fought both groups. Julani also pledged not to support foreign operations. While HTS provided services to its constituents, however, little dissent was accepted and reports of human rights abuses persisted. After the break with Al-Qaeda, HTS stopped instituting *hudud* punishments—including flogging, stoning, and amputation—associated with Islamic law. In 2021, he indicated that HTS would implement Sharia law, "but not according to the standard of ISIS or even Saudi Arabia." Around the same time, moral policing ceased in Idlib.

In the aftermath of the December 8 toppling of Assad, Julani has jettisoned his military fatigues and *nom de guerre* in favor of a suit and tie and his given name of Ahmed al-Sharaa. Yet he remains an Islamist and likely an authoritarian. Al-Sharaa has declared himself president and articulated a plan for re-establishing a Syrian state. He may not succeed in bringing all the disparate militias to heel and establishing a state monopoly on the use of force; Syria could become another Libya. Turkish-backed Arab militias are attacking US-supported Kurdish counter-ISIS forces. Should he succeed in his efforts at centralizing control of the state, however, the key question will be how Damascus will be governed. Will Syria be a Julani jihadist emirate, or a more modern, somewhat tolerant Muslim Brotherhood al-Sharaa state?

Less than three months since the revolution, it is too soon to ascertain the trajectory of the new Syria. No doubt, al-Sharaa is saying a lot of the right things. He talks about the need for an inclusive and transparent government, a popular political process to inform the new constitution, and about human rights in general and women's rights in particular. To date, Syria has not seen a dramatic curtailing of freedoms. Bars are still serving alcoholic beverages in Damascus, there is no forced hijab for women, and al-Sharaa has said that sharia (Islamic) law restrictions won't be imposed on minorities. "I believe Syria will not interfere deeply in personal freedoms, but it will take customs into consideration," he said.

Al-Sharaa has attempted to assuage concerns about the treatment of minorities in post-Assad Syria. Christians, he says, are "an essential part of the fabric of Syrian society," there will "be no more injustices against the Kurdish people," and Kurdish forces will serve in the Syrian army. Al-Sharaa assured visiting Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt that Syria would not exclude any religious group. In late January, the new government reported that it had prevented ISIS from detonating a car bomb at Sayida Zainab mosque, a prominent Shiite shrine in Damascus. While fear persists among these communities—and their treatment at the hands of what will undoubtedly be an Islamic government may deteriorate—the worst-case scenario has yet to transpire.

The same cannot be said of the Alawites, Assad's co-religionists who constitute some 10 percent of Syria's population. A week after Assad was toppled, al-Sharaa announced a general amnesty for Syrians with the exception of those implicated in killings or torture. He also committed to the security of Alawites. Nonetheless, since the

revolution, there have been repeated attacks against the community, which was an important pillar of the regime. Executions of Alawite officers from the former regime have also been reported. In early March, dozens of Alawites were reportedly massacred (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrias-transitional-honeymoon-over-after-massacres-and-disinformation) —innocents and armed opponents of Damascus—following attacks on government security officers.

This relatively benign approach of al-Sharaa in his initial months is clearly calculated to garner international recognition, generate crucial foreign assistance for reconstruction, and convince western governments to lift the raft of sanctions (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/navigating-syria-sanctions-conundrum) imposed on Syria and the now disbanded HTS. It could belie al-Sharaa's intention to consolidate control and implement a more austere Islamic exclusionary system in advance of elections, which he has pushed off for 3-4 years. Al-Sharaa's incorporation of foreign jihadists—including an ethnic Albanian US-designated terrorist from North Macedonia, a Tajik, and Chinese Uyghurs—into Syria's military is also concerning.

It would be an understatement to say that the new government in Damascus has its downsides. While al-Sharaa and company are incredibly problematic and may be predisposed to repression and intolerance, it's important not to forget what preceded them. The Assad regime was an inaugural member of the US State Sponsors of Terrorism list. Long a patron of Hamas, Hezbollah, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, among other deplorable groups, Syria was a regional and international terrorist hub. Assad was also an ally of Russia, a friend of North Korea, and a strategic ally of Iran. His regime possessed chemical weapons that were deployed against Syrian civilians, was an aspiring nuclear weapons power, and a menace to neighboring states. In addition to hosting Iraqi (Iranian-backed) Hashd militias and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps bases targeting Israel, Assad proactively worked to destabilize Lebanon and flood Jordan with Captagon amphetamines and weapons destined for militants in the West Bank and the kingdom.

Perhaps the most concerning long-term implications of the new administration in Damascus relate to the government's ideology. An Islamist government—whether jihadist or Muslim Brotherhood—in the heart of the Levant will undoubtedly embolden regional ideological fellow travelers. Already there is great trepidation of spillover in Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Worse still is the potential that, absent a robust continued US role in Syria, the state will emerge as a sphere of influence (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-age-turkish-relations-syria) of Erdogan's Muslim Brotherhood-friendly Turkey. This fear appears to be driving Arab Gulf engagement with al-Sharaa. It's also a significant concern for Israel, which has difficult relations with Ankara, notwithstanding Turkey's NATO membership.

Despite the challenges of post-Assad Syria, however, the advantages are considerable. For the foreseeable future, Syria will be focused on internal matters. In any event, Israel has destroyed much of Syria's army and much of its equipment, and disposed of its chemical weapons arsenal. Syria no longer constitutes a conventional military threat to its neighbors. Mindful of Moscow's role in the wholesale massacre of civilians, Damascus has opted not to renew Russia's lease of the naval installation in Tartus, limiting this threatening deployment in the Mediterranean. For the same reason, the new Syria has little interest in perpetuating a strategic relationship with Tehran and its regional proxies. Iran can no longer arm Hezbollah in Lebanon via Syrian territory, making it difficult for the militia to reconstitute. In January, Syria reportedly (https://www.timesofisrael.com/syrias-new-regime-says-it-stopped-weapons-shipment-heading-to-hezbollah-in-lebanon/) seized (for the second time) a shipment of rifles, RPGs and ammunition destined for Hezbollah.

Traditionally, Washington would look to shape the behavior of the Islamist government by conditioning financial aid and international reconstruction assistance. A continued US military presence in eastern Syria would also constitute leverage with Damascus. The Trump administration's likely hesitance to provide aid dollars and its reported (https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-drafts-plan-withdraw-all-its-troops-syria-nbc-news-reports-2025-02-

05/) inclination to end the small but effective US troop deployment in eastern Syria could limit US tools going forward. It could also result in a resurgence of ISIS. Overall, however, the end of Assad is a positive development for the US and its regional partners. And for the Syrian people, it is unlikely to be worse than the former regime. The "devil we knew" was awful and so inimical to US interests that even al-Sharaa stands a good chance of being better.

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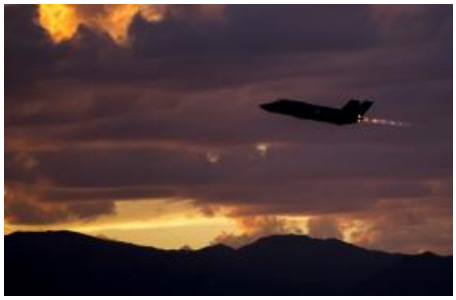

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