

What to Know About the Man Who Toppled Assad

by [Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](#)

Dec 11, 2024

Also published in *Foreign Policy*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](#)

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Gloria and Ken Levy Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadi groups in North Africa and Syria as well as the trend of foreign fighting and online jihadism.



Articles & Testimony

Abu Mohammad al-Jolani has worked for years to rebrand himself, but has he truly broken from his extremist past?

The leader of the rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham—Ahmed al-Sharaa, better known by his nom de guerre Abu Mohammad al-Jolani—has worked for years to distance himself from his al-Qaeda roots, but establishing legitimacy in the eyes of the international community will be an uphill battle. There’s also a major question about whether Syria’s instability could cause it to once again become a safe haven for terrorist groups such as the Islamic State to flourish.

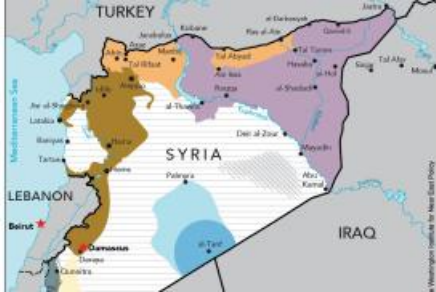
Foreign Policy reporter John Haltiwanger spoke with Washington Institute expert Aaron Zelin, who wrote [a book on HTS \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/age-political-jihadism-study-hayat-tahrir-al-sham\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/age-political-jihadism-study-hayat-tahrir-al-sham), to find out more about Jolani’s origins, his efforts to rebrand, and what’s potentially in store for Syria now that he’s the country’s de facto ruler.

Foreign Policy: Bashar al-Assad is gone, and HTS has taken over in Syria. Can you talk about the evolution of Jolani and HTS and how we got to this point?

Zelin: Jolani was originally a foreign fighter in the Iraq War. He went from Syria to Iraq and joined up with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and [his organization] al Qaeda in Iraq. He spent some time in the infamous Camp Bucca prison. And then he became the emir or leader of the Nineveh region in western Iraq for the Islamic State of Iraq, which was essentially the predecessor group to what we now call the Islamic State. After the Syrian uprising began, Jolani talked to [Islamic State leader] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi about a project in Syria. By summer 2011, Jolani went to Syria to build a new organization called Jabhat al-Nusra. It was essentially an official branch of the Islamic State of Iraq...

[Read the full interview on the Foreign Policy website. \(https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/12/11/syria-\)](https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/12/11/syria-)

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Supporting the SDF in Post-Assad Syria](#)

Dec 13, 2024

◆
Ido Levy

(/policy-analysis/supporting-sdf-post-assad-syria)

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[The U.S. Should Not Yet Trust Syria's New Regime](#)

Dec 13, 2024

◆
Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/us-should-not-yet-trust-syrias-new-regime)

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[The US Must Push Putin Out the Syrian Door](#)

Dec 12, 2024

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/us-must-push-putin-out-syrian-door)

TOPICS

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)