

What Al-Jolani's Past Can Reveal About Syria's Future

From Geoffrey Clarfield, from the [Middle East Forum](#)

In late February 2012 I (*Jonathan Spyer*) was travelling through Syria's Idlib province. I stayed for a few days in a town called Binnish, not far from the province's capital. It was, at that time, under the tentative control of the newly hatched insurgency against the regime of Bashar Assad.



An Islamist rebel fires into the air to celebrate the overthrow of the Assad regime in Damascus; Dec. 8, 2024. Shutterstock

The young host of the place I was staying – I'll call him 'D' – was connected to the fledgling structures of what at that time was widely known as the 'Free Syrian Army'. But through a cousin of his he also had links to another group of fighters just getting organised in the town. These men were a little older than the FSA members, and were more obviously Sunni Islamist in their appearance and their orientation. D told me at the time that 'this thing [the civil war] started in Idlib, and it will end in Idlib too'. It seemed an absurdly self important statement at the time. Assad's army were still in

control of the greater part of the province. The insurgents had just a few rifles to put up against the dictator's military machine.

As it turns out, though, D was right. Not just in his general sentiment that the insurgency would be victorious. But in his precise prediction that the Islamist circles organising in Binnish at that time, who were a very early iteration of what would eventually become Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), would be the ones to bring victory. Because, of course, contrary to all predictions, it was from the province of Idleb, long forgotten by the world, that the Syrian Sunni Islamist insurgency erupted in late November to make its final triumphant run through Syria's cities to Damascus.

As a result of that bold move, HTS leader Ahmed Sharaa/Abu Mohammed al-Jolani is now the de facto ruler in the Syrian capital. Western media and governments are weighing his every utterance in an effort to understand what may lie in Syria's future. Has he moderated? Is he still a jihadi? Are there hopes for more representative government in Syria?

There is every reason to believe that the system developed by al-Jolani's 'Syrian Salvation Government' in Idleb will now be installed throughout the country, or at least in those parts of the country he controls (30 per cent of Syria remains in the hands of the Syrian Kurdish forces). This week he even appointed his 'prime minister' from those days, Mohammed al-Bashir, as the interim prime minister in Damascus.

In terms of the ideas that underlie HTS's administration in Idleb, the organisation's highest religious authority is Abd al-Rahim Atoun. Atoun's attitudes toward governance may be gleaned from the fact that in September 2021 he delivered a lecture in Idleb entitled 'Jihad and Resistance in the Islamic World: the Taliban as a Model'.

Elsewhere, in reference to the 7 October attacks of last year,

Atoun said that 'what the mujahideen are doing for the sake of Allah Almighty in the Battle of the Flood of Al-Aqsa is the greatest act of Islam in this era, and it is a blessed jihad to repel aggression and defend religion'.

Atoun is the highest religious authority of HTS and may therefore be considered al-Jolani's guide in these matters.

As has been widely reported, the government of Israel has been engaged in recent days in preventing the emergent Islamist regime in Damascus from possessing any but the most rudimentary military capacity. Some have questioned the motivation for this action. In this regard, it may safely be assumed that what the civilian researcher (and former IDF military intelligence officer) Alex Grinberg knows, the government of Israel also knows. What HTS started and finished in Idlib is now in Damascus. Israel's decision to disarm it as far as is possible is likely to yet be considered prescient.

Read it [all here.](#)