

Abu Mohammad al-Julani: Putting lipstick on a pig

thecradle.co/articles/abu-mohammad-al-julani-putting-lipstick-on-a-pig

A Cradle Correspondent



Just in time for the Al-Qaeda offshoot Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) lightning conquest of Syria, a western PR campaign was launched to rebrand the terror group's leader, Abu Mohammad al-Julani.

The BBC assured their readers that Julani, now commonly referred to as Ahmed al-Sharaa – which is his real name – had “reinvented himself,” while the *Telegraph* insisted that the former deputy to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is now “diversity friendly.”

On 6 December, just days before entering the capital Damascus, Julani sat down with CNN journalist Jomana Karadsheh for an exclusive interview to explain his past.

“Julani says he has gone through episodes of transformation through the years,” CNN wrote, after he assured Karadsheh “no one has the right to eliminate” Syria's Alawites, Christians, and Druze.

But why was Julani so eager to convince the American public that he had no plans to exterminate Syria's religious minorities? This question looms larger when recalling the massacre of 190 Alawites in Latakia on 4 August 2013, and the taking of hundreds more as captives.

Back then, militants from HTS (then the Nusra Front), ISIS, and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) attacked 10 villages, slaughtering civilians in ways documented by Human Rights Watch: gunshot wounds, stabbings, decapitations, and charred remains. “Some corpses were found in a state of complete charring, and others had their feet tied,” the report stated.

Another useful US asset

Fast forward to recent years, and Julani's "transformation" seems less about repentance and more about utility. Despite HTS remaining on the US terror list – and an American bounty of \$10 million reserved for Julani himself – former US special envoy to Syria, James Jeffrey, described the group as a strategic "asset" for US operations in Syria.

Under the guise of countering extremism, Washington pursued a dual strategy: enforcing crushing economic sanctions on Syria – of the sort that killed 500,000 Iraqi children in the 1990s – while ensuring its wheat-abundant and oil-rich regions remain under US control.

Ambassador Jeffrey admitted to *PBS* in March 2021 that Julani's HTS was the "least bad option of the various options on Idlib, and Idlib is one of the most important places in Syria, which is one of the most important places right now in the Middle East."

But how did Julani ascend to power in Idlib? His Nusra Front spearheaded the 2015 conquest under the banner of Jaish al-Fatah (the Army of Conquest), a coalition that combined Nusra suicide bombers with Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters equipped with CIA-supplied TOW missiles. *Foreign Policy* hailed the campaign's swift progress, crediting this synergy of jihadists and western arms.

Years later, US official Brett McGurk would label Idlib "the largest Al-Qaeda safe haven since 9/11." Yet, the crucial role of US weapons and strategic aid in this outcome went unmentioned.

Assistance from Tel Aviv and Brussels too

This assistance extended beyond arms: the *Financial Times* (FT) reported that in response, EU foreign ministers "lifted an oil embargo against Syria to allow rebels to sell crude to fund their operation."

While the FSA claimed control of the oil fields, activists openly acknowledged that the Nusra Front was the true beneficiary, trucking barrels to Turkiye for refining or export to Europe. The arrangement netted Nusra millions before ISIS seized the fields a year later.

Academic and Syria expert Joshua Landis noted the importance of controlling the oil fields, explaining that "Whoever gets their hands on the oil, water, and agriculture holds Sunni Syria by the throat" and that "the logical conclusion from this craziness is that Europe will be funding Al-Qaeda."

Behind the scenes, western and regional powers facilitated Julani's ascent. Israeli airstrikes supported Nusra during clashes with Syrian forces, while outgoing Israeli Army Chief Gadi Eisenkot admitted to supplying "light weapons" to rebel groups – essentially acknowledging what the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) had been reporting for years to "discredit the rebels as stooges of the Zionists."

Previous reports in the *Wall Street Journal* showed that Israel had for years provided humanitarian and medical aid to "rebels" in southern Syria, including by bringing Nusra fighters across the border into Israel for treatment.

In an interview with *The American Conservative* in border village Beit Jinn, militants revealed that Israel had been paying salaries – to the tune of \$200,000 per month – for the entire year before HTS troops were expelled from the area by the SAA and fled to Idlib.

Meanwhile, the US oversaw a “cataract of weaponry” to Syria’s opposition, as described by the *New York Times*. Though publicly earmarked for the FSA, these arms frequently ended up in Nusra’s hands.

Julani’s meteoric rise began years earlier, seeded by his ties to Al-Qaeda in Iraq and its Jordanian leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The latter, whose activities conveniently justified the US invasion of Iraq, operated with tacit US acknowledgment.

Julani followed a similar trajectory, emerging as a key player in the Nusra Front, which conducted bombings in Damascus and other cities in 2011 and 2012, with attacks initially misattributed to the Syrian government.

A salafist principality

Why did the EU choose to “fund Al-Qaeda” by dropping oil sanctions? Why did the US provide a “cataract of weaponry” to Nusra?

An August 2012 Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report revealed that the US and its regional allies supported the establishment of a “Salafist principality” in eastern Syria and western Iraq as part of the effort to depose president Bashar al-Assad and divide the country.

The DIA report said a radical religious mini-state exactly of the sort later established by ISIS as its “caliphate” was the US goal, even while admitting that the so-called Syrian revolution seeking to topple Assad’s government was being driven by “Salafists, the Muslim Brotherhood, and al-Qaeda.”

The seeds of the Salafist principality were planted when late ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi dispatched Julani to Syria in August 2011 – at that time, Baghdadi’s group was known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

Prominent Lebanese journalist Radwan Mortada, who was embedded with Al-Qaeda fighters from Lebanon in Syria, met Julani in the central Syrian city of Homs at this time. Mortada informs *The Cradle* that Julani was being hosted by the Farouq Brigades, an FSA faction based in the city.

Contrary to media reports, Farouq commanders insisted the group was not comprised of defectors from the Syrian army. Instead, they said Farouq was a sectarian Salafist group that included fighters who had fought for Zarqawi’s Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) after the 2003 US invasion.

A few months later, Julani and his fighters secretly entered the war against the Syrian government by carrying out multiple terror attacks. In Damascus on 23 December 2011, Julani sent suicide bombers to target the General Security Directorate in Damascus, killing 44, including civilians and security personnel.

Two weeks later, on 6 January 2012, Julani sent another suicide bomber to detonate explosives near a bus in the Midan district of Damascus, killing some 26 people.

The establishment of the “Support Front for the People of the Levant,” or the Nusra Front, was revealed after a videotape was provided to journalist Mortada showing Julani and other masked men announcing the group’s existence and claiming responsibility for the attacks, which opposition activists had blamed on the Syrian government itself.

The great prison release

Julani’s rise, however, was facilitated years earlier. In what has been dubbed the “Great Prison Release of 2009,” the US military freed 5,700 high-security detainees from Bucca Prison in Iraq. Among these was Julani, alongside future ISIS leaders like Baghdadi. Craig Whiteside of the US Naval War College described Camp Bucca as “America’s Jihadi University,” emphasizing the role of these releases in revitalizing the Islamic State of Iraq – which had been nearly defeated by Sunni tribal uprisings.

“The United States is often unjustly blamed for many things that are wrong in this world, but the revitalization of ISIL [ISIS] and its incubation in our own Camp Bucca is something that Americans truly own,” Whiteside wrote.

“The Iraqi government has many enemies, and the United States helped put many of them out on the street in 2009. Why?” Whiteside wondered, not realizing they would be sent to Syria as part of the US’s covert war to topple Bashar al-Assad.

More alarming today is the prospect of HTS releasing thousands of ISIS fighters from US–Kurdish prisons in Syria's north to expand their ranks. It wouldn't be the first time. This past July, American-backed Kurds released around 1,500 ISIS prisoners from detention camps, which the US military describes as an ISIS “army in waiting.”

The question of who Abu Mohammad al-Julani is – his motivations, ideologies, and transformations – is ultimately less important than what he represents. Over the past two decades, one fact remains consistent: Julani is a tool of US and Israeli strategy.

From his early days in Iraq to his rise as the leader of the Nusra Front and later HTS, Julani has played a pivotal role in advancing the geopolitical interests of his benefactors. Whether branded a terrorist or a blazer-wearing moderate, his actions have consistently served as a means to destabilize Syria and the wider West Asian region.

Julani’s “reinvention” is no more than a veneer designed to mask the enduring reality of his role: a strategic asset in a game where ideology is secondary to power.

