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- Editorial Dept. Tel
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+98 21 84711226
 208, Khorramshahr Ave., Tehran, Iran
 +98 21 88548892-5
 +98 21 88500601/irandaily@iranagahiha.com
 www.irandaily.ir/newspaper.irandaily.ir
 irandaily@icpi.ir
 Iran Cultural & Press Institute



Julani's journey; a story of change and power



International Desk

The Syrian government fell early on Sunday in a shocking end to President Bashar al-Assad's 24-year rule over the Arab nation after the militant group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) seized the capital, Damascus.

After a week of rapid offensive, the armed faction, led by Abu Mohammad al-Julani, announced on Sunday that they had liberated Damascus and ended the president's reign, facing no resistance from government troops.

Julani became a key figure in Syria's insurgency. Once linked to Al-Qaeda, he is one of the most wanted figures by the US with a \$10 million bounty on his head.

Born Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa in 1982 in Riyadh, where his father was a petroleum engineer, Julani is now Syria's most recognizable rebel leader, having gradually risen to prominence since breaking away from Al-Qaeda in 2013.

He rebranded his group and established himself as the ruler of rebel-held north-western Syria.

Julani's journey began as a prisoner. Arrested by US forces in Iraq in 2006 and held for five years, he was later tasked with establishing Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, Al-Nusra Front, which grew its influence in opposition-held areas, especially Idlib.

His ties with Al-Qaeda and Daesh played a role in his rise. He now leads HTS, which fought against Assad's government.

His transformation from prisoner to rebel leader is significant. The HTS leader's connections with major terrorist groups have been crucial. These ties helped him gain power and influence in Syria. HTS, under Julani, has been a major force in the Syrian civil war. The group aimed to overthrow Assad's government, which led to ongoing conflict and instability in the region.

Julani's story is one of change and pow-

er. From his early days with Al-Qaeda to leading HTS, he remains a key player in Syria's future.

As the founder of HTS, Julani has for nearly a decade sought to dissociate himself from other armed forces and their focus on transnational operations, switching instead to focusing on creating an "Islamic republic" in Syria. Since 2016, he has been positioning himself and his group as credible caretakers of a Syria liberated from Assad, whose government faced a popular uprising during the Arab Spring in 2011, leading to a war that had continued since.

HTS governs Idlib Province through the so-called Syrian Salvation Government, which it established in 2017 to deliver civil services, education, healthcare, a judiciary, and infrastructure, as well as to manage finances and aid distribution. However, according to activists, news reports, and local monitors, HTS rules with an iron fist and

does not tolerate dissent. The independent journalism organization Syria Direct reports that HTS is responsible for the disappearances of activists and has fired live ammunition at protesters who accuse the group of withholding services from communities that oppose it.

For someone who once operated in the shadows, Julani exuded confidence and tried to project modernity in his interview with CNN, which took place in broad daylight and with little security.

Two days before the Assad government's collapse, in his first sit-down media interview in years, at an undisclosed location in Syria, Julani spoke about plans to create a government based on institutions and a "council chosen by the people."

"When we talk about objectives, the goal of the revolution remains the overthrow of this regime. It is our right to use all available means to achieve that goal," said Julani.

Despite Julani's effort to distance his new group from Al-Qaeda, the United States designated HTS a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 2018 and placed a \$10 million bounty on him. However, Julani says he has gone through episodes of transformation through the years. "A person in their twenties will have a different personality than someone in their thirties or forties, and certainly someone in their fifties. This is human nature."

Turkey, the United Nations and several other Western nations also continue to designate HTS as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, despite the group's attempts to distance itself from its roots. Julani pushed back against the enduring terror designation of HTS, calling the label "primarily political and, at the same time, inaccurate," arguing that some extremist practices had "created a divide" between HTS and extremist groups. He said that he was opposed to some of the more brutal tactics used by

other groups which led to his severing ties with them. He also said that he was never personally involved in attacks on civilians.

Julani's interview with CNN on Thursday was an about-face from the hard-line rhetoric that he used during his first-ever televised interview in 2013, when he was interviewed by Al Jazeera with his face in shadow. At the time, his remarks were focused on furthering Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria.

On Thursday, Julani projected a different vision for the war-torn country. In a sign of his attempted rebranding, he also publicly used his real name for the first time - Ahmed al-Sharaa - instead of the nom de guerre by which he is widely known.

If opposition forces succeed in toppling Assad's government, it will transition into "a state of governance, institutions and so on," he envisioned.

Syria's opposition forces are decentralized and made up of different ideologies, albeit united by a common goal of upending the Assad government.

The group said it is working to reassure civilians and groups that suffered persecution at the hands of extremist groups in Syria's decade-long civil war. It also said it has gone out of its way to publicly tell Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities that they will live safely under its rule.

"There were some violations against them [minorities] by certain individuals during periods of chaos, but we addressed these issues," Julani said, when asked about concerns for their safety.

"No one has the right to erase another group. These sects have coexisted in this region for hundreds of years, and no one has the right to eliminate them," he said.

"We are talking about a larger project - we are talking about building Syria," Julani continued. "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is merely one part of this dialogue, and it may dissolve at any time."



Iran will not...

However, the demise of Daesh did not bring an end to the conflict. Other opposition groups,

such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), continued their resistance against the Syrian government, maintaining a foothold in certain regions. After Daesh's decline, these groups, bolstered by the support of the Zionist regime and other entities seeking Assad's downfall, regained their military capabilities and resumed their operations. Regrettably, the Syrian army underestimated these threats, and when the opposition forces launched their offensive, the military was unable to mount a strong de-

fense. Within a fortnight, the opposition achieved its objectives, capitalizing on the army's unpreparedness.

What is evident is that no government can sustain its position indefinitely through external support alone. The preservation of sovereignty hinges primarily on the internal strength and loyalty of the government and its military personnel, which was notably lacking during the recent crisis in Syria.

As we have observed, the absence of internal resolve to resist adversaries leaves no alternative but capitulation. The recent developments in Syria have inflicted significant damage to the

country's infrastructure, thereby weakening its overall stability. Syria has endured severe economic and military setbacks, and its people have grappled with economic hardships and poverty. These compounded challenges led to the Syrian army's rapid disintegration in the face of opposition forces, preventing it from mounting a robust defense. Moreover, the opposition, being fellow Syrians and refraining from mass killings unlike Daesh, was more readily accepted by the people, leading to the army's surrender. Despite these interpretations, given Syria's alignment with the axis of resistance, Iran will certainly not leave the

Syrian people alone. Neighboring countries like Turkey, Russia, Iraq, and Jordan will also not remain indifferent to Syria's issues and must take action to prevent external domination with malicious intent.

Syria has long been a staunch ally of Iran, with its people supporting the Iranian system and nation. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Syria stood by Iran against Saddam Hussein's regime. Consequently, Iran will not withdraw its support from Syria and its people. In the current situation, Iranian officials must implement measures to prevent Syria from falling into foreign hands, as the security of

Syria directly impacts Iran and the broader region.

As we have witnessed, Iran has not been passive in the face of developments in Syria. The recent activities of our foreign minister, who has traveled to Turkey, Russia, and several Arab countries to facilitate a resolution, demonstrate Iran's active role. Extensive negotiations have been conducted, including a recent meeting in Qatar involving foreign ministers from eight countries and some Syrian opposition figures, where discussions focused on the Syrian crisis.

With the Assad government having stepped down and new conditions prevailing in the

country, Iran will closely monitor Syrian issues and make informed decisions. Iranian officials and policymakers, known for their strategic acumen, can navigate these developments to steer the country and regional issues in the right direction. Similar challenges, such as the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, have been managed through wise policies and appropriate measures. In the matter of Syria and recent developments, we are confident that Iran will not be left behind and will guide the situation in favor of our country, the Syrian people, and the region.