Ahmed Al-Sharaa: An intellectual shift or a repositioning on the chessboard?

(CNBC Arabia exclusive)

Sharia's development is a strategic response to the complex political landscape in Syria, and its efforts to reformulate itself are a deliberate attempt to gain local and international legitimacy and support.

This exceptional psychological transformation stems from a practical necessity. In order to succeed, he must put his supporters under strict control.

With this pragmatic adaptation, it is difficult to know the veracity of his public statements and recent behaviors.The true measure of honesty will depend on his long-term commitment to inclusive governance.

Political facts are capable of producing real transformation. These facts constitute the change in the strategies of the current leaders of Syria from the strategies of the targeted opposition fighting a brutal regime to leading the government

Some of Sharia's early rhetoric and moves suggest it has already evolved. but only actions and time will reveal the depth and sustainability of any real changes.

Exclusive - CNBC Arabia - Fares Al-Barghouti and Mohammed Khaled

From military fatigues to a smart suit and tie, from "al-Julani" to "al-Sharaa", the Syrian president for the transitional period, Ahmed al-Sharaa, has dominated the

political scene around the world, and occupied the minds of political and psychological analysts alike.

How can one of the leaders of an Islamic organization that the international community is fighting for its danger and classifying as "terrorist" assume leadership of a country that contains multiple sects and religions, and control those around him from former comrades in arms to prevent the occurrence of transgressions that harm the social fabric of a people breathing freedom for the first time in nearly 60 years?

Answering these doubts and questions requires a deep dig into Sharaa's personality and the apparent shift in the Syrian president's thinking during the transitional period, as he moved between different groups.

Ahmed Al-Sharaa was born in 1982 in the Saudi capital, Riyadh. His father worked as an engineer in the oil sector, before the family returned to Syria in 1989 and lived in the Mazzeh neighborhood of Damascus.

At the age of 21, Al-Sharaa joined the ranks of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq with the outbreak of war in 2003, to get close to the leader and founder of Al-Qaeda there, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and to fight the American army for 3 years.

In 2006, he moved to Lebanon, where he is rumored to have supervised the training of the Jund al-Sham group, before returning to Iraq and being arrested by US forces, and then joining the Islamic State in Iraq.

With the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, Al-Sharaa returned to Syria to establish the "Al-Nusra Front" in 2012. In 2016, Al-Sharaa announced that he had ended his relationship with Al-Qaeda and split from it, after which he merged the "Al-Nusra Front" with other organizations to establish the "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham."

From Al-Qaeda to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

Al-Qaeda is known for its ideology and thought, which is based on the principle of establishing an Islamic caliphate in the world, and using all means to fight those who stand in the way of achieving this goal, wherever they are.

Hence, it becomes clear that the scope of Al-Qaeda's work is global, which is not consistent with the Al-Nusra Front, which was founded on two pillars: toppling the Assad regime in Syria and establishing an Islamic state there.

Speaking of the Islamic State, when comparing the cities of Raqqa, which the Islamic State, which was born from the womb of Al-Qaeda and carries many of its ideas, considered its capital, and Idlib, which was more like an independent state that Ahmed Al-Sharaa was responsible for under his leadership of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, we find a vast difference in the way it governed, dealt with the population, and imposed laws.

It is worth noting that Al-Sharaa refused to join ISIS when its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, invited him to do so, which led to the outbreak of a devastating war between the two parties.

When looking at the organizations to which Ahmed al-Sharaa belonged, we see a decline in the level of extremism, from a global scope of operations to a local scope in Syria only, and from rule by iron and fire to a mini-state with a cabinet and universities in which the percentage of female students is about 60%, according to him.

In a previous statement by the Syrian President, Ahmed al-Sharaa said that he was against carrying out operations outside Syria, because carrying out an action abroad is completely contrary to his policy, according to him.

But what do experts think about this? Can we judge Sharia's steps by looking at its history and studying the groups it joined?

CNBC Arabia interviewed a group of Western political scientists to deconstruct Sharaa's political personality and analyze his recent shift to a more moderate position, which some have described as a "strategic response to the political landscape." They discussed Sharaa's "sayings and statements" in comparison to his practical "actions" on the ground, looking for areas of convergence and divergence, to provide a comprehensive picture of Syria's leader, and then speculate on the scenarios that await the country under Sharaa's rule, formerly al-Jolani.

Melinda Gonzalez, director of the Master's Program in Global Conflict and Human Security at the University of New Hampshire, told CNBC Arabia: "Sharaa's evolution appears to be a strategic response to the complex political landscape in Syria. His efforts to rebrand himself suggest a deliberate attempt to gain legitimacy and support domestically and internationally. While these actions suggest pragmatic adaptation, it is difficult to know the veracity of his public statements and recent behavior. The true measure of sincerity will depend on his long-term commitment to inclusive governance."

But she believes that “we shouldn’t expect someone who embraces a jihadist ideology to suddenly turn into a liberal democrat. However, Shaara is a skilled tactician who is fully aware that he must be pragmatic in the short term — regardless of what he believes in his heart — or he will not have the support of international donors or domestic voters,” she says.

While the desire to survive likely plays a large role in reshaping Shaara's public image, there may also be elements of real psychological transformation. "We simply can't know in the short term," Gonzalez said.

She stresses that regardless of whether he has a real change in his views, “we must remember that he is in fact politically and militarily weak... Therefore, he must have a clear vision of what he can achieve... Syria is poor and fragmented, his grip on power is fragile, and if he overestimates his strength, he may lose it or he may lose international economic support.”

“So, pragmatism, at least in the short term, is a good survival strategy, while his continued hold on power depends on his ability to reconcile past beliefs with the demands of political leadership and build trust among Syria’s diverse communities – or risk rebellion or resistance to his rule.”

Monitoring and evaluation indicators

In the same context, Gonzalez sheds light on a set of indicators - both psychological and linguistic - that may reveal the contradictions in this new narrative, in her estimation, as follows:

- Use of language: “The continued use of extremist or exclusionary rhetoric in private or less public settings may indicate lingering extremist views.”

- Policy decisions: “We should pay more attention to his actions than his words. Rulers are very good at saying the right things about inclusive government, but what do their actions indicate? In practice, do he and his inner circle favor or discriminate against certain groups? Do his actions indicate that he is consolidating his power and creating an authoritarian regime?”

He has said that elections may have to wait several years, and many have taken this to mean that he is not sincere about democratic elections. So, “he may be laying the groundwork for a dictatorship,” she adds. “But on the other hand, in development studies, there is a strong case for delaying elections in a highly polarized post-conflict country like Syria because people need time to create new political parties and cultivate the norms of electoral politics. So, we should pay attention to whether he is making efforts to create a political environment conducive to multiparty elections at a later time.”

- Patterns of behavior: “Maintaining an association with extremist individuals or groups or engaging in authoritarian practices would indicate a lack of real change.”