

HTS's Julani is not a pragmatist, but a sophisticated strategist

written by Moshe Fuzaylov | 25.12.2024

To many researchers, journalists, leaders, and citizens in the West, Abu Mohammed al-Julani, the leader of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), is perceived as a pragmatic figure. However, this belief, rooted in Western perspectives, reflects the cultural biases of the West more than the realities of the Middle East. To understand why, we must examine how Western culture shapes the perception of leaders in the Middle East and how the role Julani himself plays in this sophisticated diplomatic game.

Westerners are logically constrained by their cultural bias in understanding the Middle East due to fundamental cultural differences between the two regions. Westerners are the cultural product of over a century of devastating wars in Europe - conflicts that reshaped the global order and led to the adoption of values such as peace, prosperity, and cooperation among nations. After two world wars resulting in tens of millions dead and immense suffering, Western culture became centered around aspirations for economic stability, human rights, and international harmony.

In contrast, the Middle East has evolved over millennia as a desert tribal culture shaped by territorial conflicts and religious wars that continue to define the region.

While religious wars in the West ended centuries ago, in the Middle East, the Sunni-Shia conflict and ethnic struggles remain central to ongoing conflicts. Over the past 30 years, Iran's Shi'ite hegemony dominated the Middle East through coalitions and threats. Today, however, the Sunni coalition, led by Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood, is gaining strength, particularly after the removal of Assad and the conquest of Syria.

Cognitive bias in the Western view of Julani

The gap between Western values and Middle Eastern realities creates a significant cognitive dissonance for Western leaders, journalists, and researchers. They struggle to reconcile how a jihadist leader such as Julani seized power in

Syria and rebranded himself as pragmatic leader to the world. How does the Western mind bridge this gap? Through a mechanism of cognitive distortion.

This mechanism operates as follows: to reconcile their expectations with reality, Western observers interpret Julani's actions as signaling change. His adoption of Western attire, his avoidance of excessive violence against local populations, and his diplomatic language are seen as proof of pragmatism. However, the truth is that Julani's actions do not reflect Western values but rather a distinctly Islamic strategy known as *taqiyya*.

What is *taqiyya*?

Taqiyya is a doctrine designed to protect Islamic believers from harm or persecution. The Quran permits Muslims to conceal their faith when faced with "disbelievers" (enemies of Islam) if necessary to protect themselves (Quran, Surah 28:3). It even allows Muslims to declare disbelief when under duress, provided that faith remains intact in their hearts. Even the Prophet Muhammad himself employed *taqiyya* in certain situations.

One famous example of Muhammad's use of *taqiyya* was the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah with the Quraysh tribe. Many scholars view this treaty as strategic *taqiyya*, as Muhammad agreed to a ceasefire with the intention of later conquering Mecca - a goal he eventually achieved.

Julani's strategic sophistication recalls that of the late PLO leader Yasser Arafat. In a speech in Johannesburg on May 10, 1994, Arafat compared the Oslo Accords to the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah before it was broken. History has shown that Arafat meant what he said - those who doubt it can review the Second Intifada and the *Karine A* weapons ship incident. In 2002, I had the privilege of interrogating that ship's crew, an investigation that traced the operation back to Arafat and his finance minister, Fuad Shubaki.

The influence of Turkey's Erdogan

Julani has a masterful mentor in Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. His cooperation with this Turkish director explains much of Julani's success in deceiving the West. As a stronghold of the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey excels in

diplomatic manipulation of Western perceptions. Through Erdogan's mentorship, Turkey has taught Julani how to adopt a pragmatic facade that serves his ideological and political goals.

The strategy of '*hudna*'

A key tactic in Julani's playbook is the concept of *hudna* - a temporary cessation of hostilities - rooted in Islamic history. According to the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, *hudna* is permitted when Muslims are in a position of weakness, allowing them to regroup and grow stronger before resuming conflict. When asked about relations with Israel or future wars, Julani does not rule out fighting.

Instead, he frames the situation in terms of "the weakness of the believers" and "the good of the ummah" (nation). This approach avoids committing to genuine peace and instead cloaks itself in religiously sanctioned postponement.

The Western illusion vs the simple truth

Political researchers, politicians, and journalists in the West who lack an understanding of the cultural and religious context interpret Julani's words and actions as progress toward Islamic modernization. The simple truth is that Julani remains an ideological jihadist whose long-term goals exclude peace or prosperity in Western terms. A fundamentalist Muslim willing to make peace with Israel is, in a cultural-religious sense, as unlikely as an ultra-Orthodox Jew willing to eat non-kosher meat.

Conclusion: Realism in perception

Having spent over 30 years in interrogation rooms with some of the most notorious Arab terrorists and spies, my conclusion is clear: The West must view the Middle East and its leaders through a realistic lens. Julani is not pragmatic in the Western sense but a sophisticated strategist who uses diplomacy, religious history, and Western misconceptions to achieve his goals. Only by understanding the cultural and religious context can the West formulate a realistic and informed policy toward leaders such as Julani and his mentor, Erdogan.

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