

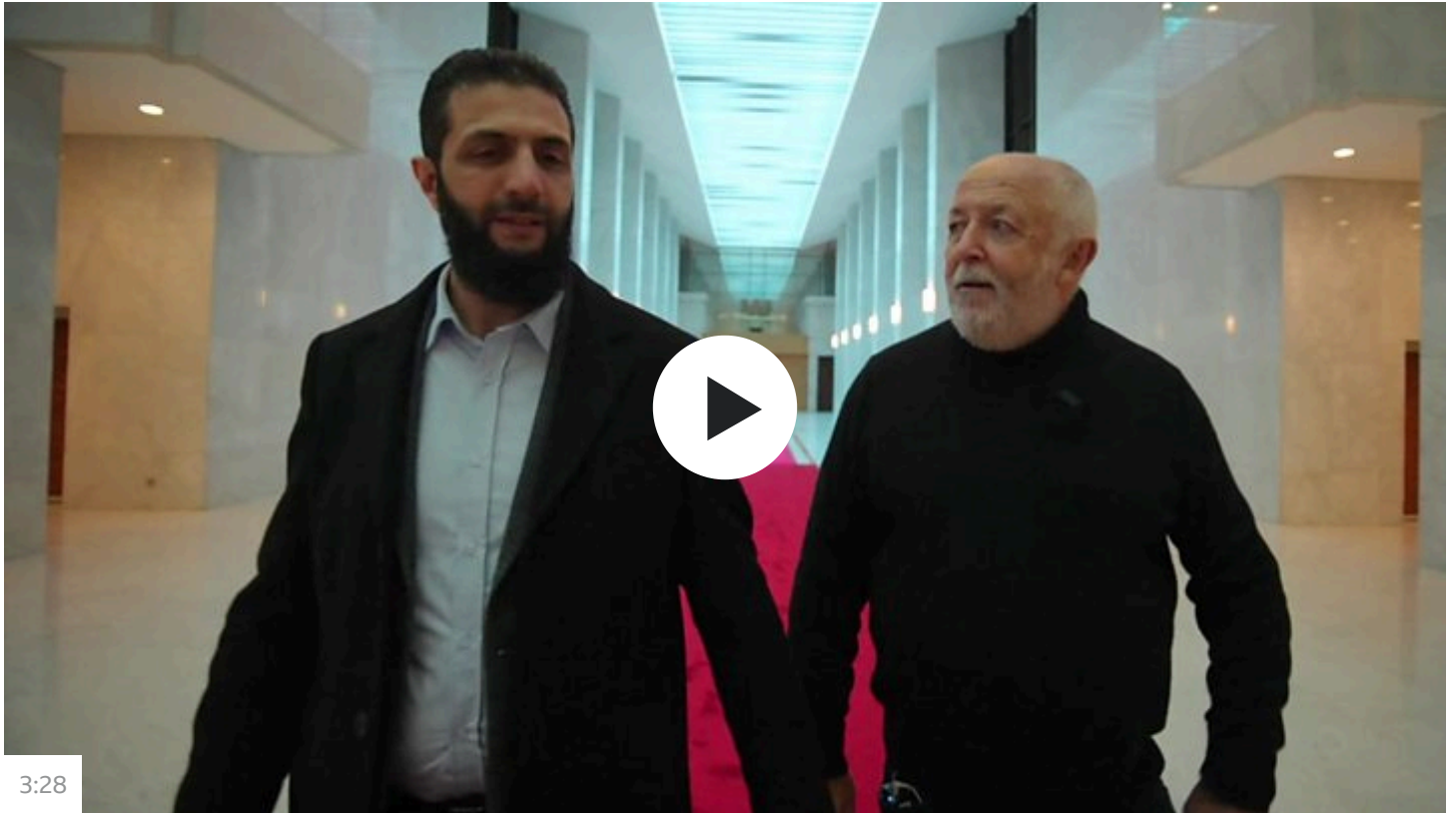
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Syria not a threat to world, rebel leader Ahmed al-Sharaa tells BBC

5 days ago

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International Editor, BBC News

Reporting from [Damascus](#)

Watch: BBC speaks to Syrian rebel leader Ahmed al-Sharaa

The de facto leader of Syria, Ahmed al-Sharaa, has said the country is exhausted by war and is not a threat to its neighbours or to the West.

In an interview with the BBC in Damascus, he called for sanctions on Syria to be lifted.

"Now, after all that has happened, sanctions must be lifted because they were targeted at the old regime. The victim and the oppressor should not be treated in the same way," he said.

Sharaa led the lightning offensive that toppled Bashar al-Assad's regime less than two weeks ago. He is the leader of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the dominant group in

the rebel alliance, and was previously known by his nom de guerre of Abu Mohammed al-Jolani.

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He said HTS should be de-listed as a terrorist organisation. It is designated as one by the UN, US, EU and UK, among many others, as it started as a splinter group of al-Qaeda, which it broke away from in 2016.

Sharaa said HTS was not a terrorist group.

They did not target civilians or civilian areas, he said. In fact, they considered themselves to be victim of the crimes of the Assad regime.

He denied that he wanted to turn Syria into a version of Afghanistan.

Sharaa said the countries were very different, with different traditions. Afghanistan was a tribal society. In Syria, he said, there was a different mindset.

He said he believed in education for women.

"We've had universities in Idlib for more than eight years," Sharaa said, referring to Syria's north-western province that has been held by rebels since 2011.

"I think the percentage of women in universities is more than 60%."

And when asked whether the consumption of alcohol would be allowed, Sharaa said: "There are many things I just don't have the right to talk about because they are legal issues."

He added that there would be a "Syrian committee of legal experts to write a constitution. They will decide. And any ruler or president will have to follow the law".

Sharaa was relaxed throughout the interview, wearing civilian clothes, and tried to offer reassurance to all those who believe his group has not broken with its extremist past.

Many Syrians do not believe him.

The actions of Syria's new rulers in the next few months will indicate the kind of country they want Syria to be - and the way they want to rule it.

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