



## Syria's Mohammed al-Jolani: Terrorist Or "Noble Rebel"?

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**Glenn Greenwald (GG):** Now I mentioned earlier this incredible transformation of how Al-Jolani is talked about and how his group is talked about, and it just shows you how flexible and empty this phrase terrorist is. I mean the United States of course famously or notoriously supported the predecessor of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, the Mujahideen, in the 1980s under Ronald Reagan because we wanted to arm them, bring them from Saudi Arabia to fight against the Russian invaders and we did, and we brought them to the US, we brought them to the Oval Office, we heralded them as freedom fighters, the same people who became Al-Qaeda shortly thereafter, and now when they turned against the United States they suddenly became terrorists. Now that's happening in reverse, now that we need these Al-Qaeda and ISIS militants, this terrorist who's leading the rebellion against Assad, we need to turn him into a glamorous or at least an acceptable figure. Even though he's on the terrorist list as well. Here from CNN, doing its job as always and helping the government from December 6th on Friday, quote: *How Syria's rebel leader went from radical jihadist to a blazer-wearing 'revolutionary'*. "Ahmed Al-Sharaa, an Islamist militant in his late 20s, moved back to Syria from Iraq in 2011 with six men in a monthly stipend of \$50,000 from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who would go on to become the world's most wanted terrorist" as the head of ISIS. "His mission was to establish Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Jabhat Al-Nusra... He's better known by his nom de guerre, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. Born in the Saudi capital of Riyadh to Syrian parents from the Israeli occupied Golan Heights and raised in Damascus, Jolani said in an interview with PBS in 2021 that he was galvanised by the second Palestinian Intifada against Israel in the early 2000s and went on to become a jihadist in Iraq after the 2003 US invasion. His deep knowledge of Syria caught the attention of his commanders in Iraq as they were looking to expand their foothold in Syria during the country's uprising. Over the years, his influence grew despite his identity being kept under wraps. During television interviews, he never faced the camera directly and always covered his face in public appearances. His public debut was in a 2016 video where he announced a split from Al-Qaeda to create what he said was a Syria focused anti-regime front with other local factions". It was originally the Front for the Conquest of the Levant and then changed its name to HTS or the Organisation for the Liberation of the Levant. Quote, "'This new formation has no relation to any external party', he said at the time. In the years that followed, Jolani replaced his Islamist camouflage attire for a Western-style blazer and shirt, established a semi-technocratic government, which his group held control over and promoted himself as a viable partner in regional and Western efforts to curb Iran's influence in the Middle East. He concluded operations against ISIS, including the 2023 high profile killing of an ISIS leader. Quote, 'I believe that everyone in life goes through phases and experiences... As you grow, you learn and you continue to learn until the very last day of your life', he said when CNN asked about his transformation". Transformation from an Al-Qaeda and ISIS militant? The leader of Al -Qaeda in Syria, to a blazer wearing moderate who loves plurality and the right of dissent... And who has been obviously trained to appeal to a Western audience speaking to Western media. And already the wheels are in motion to transform him officially from Sky News, this is how they said it earlier today: *Syrian rebel group HTS could be removed from the Uk's banned terrorist organisation list*. It is "currently considered an alternative name for Al-Qaeda under the UK's case list of proscribed terrorist organisations, but its leader has sought to distance itself from the Islamist militants". And right on the State Department page, you can go and look right

now, they have a page, a section of their website for rewards for wanted terrorists, where they say if you give us any non-public information that leads to his discovery, we will give you in this case up to a \$10 million reward. And there you see it. Mohammed Al-Jawlani in the Near East. Who knows where he is? North Africa and the Middle East. You can call the US government if you know where he is and get a \$10 million reward. I think everyone now knows where he is because he's now going to be the key Western partner governing Syria. And that's why he's been transformed from a camouflage wearing ISIS militant into a blazer wearing militant who promises to moderate, who promises to love Israel, who doesn't speak up when Israel invades Syrian territory. We were told for 15 years that Al-Qaeda and ISIS were the greatest threats in our history, greatest existential threats, that we had to fundamentally retransform our government, our foreign policy, dismantle our civil liberties in the name of combating them. And yet there we are in Syria for a decade or longer fighting alongside those very groups in an effort to achieve our shared goal of removing Bashar al-Assad. And now we're about to embrace and formally validate one of those people who we were told was the greatest threat to our country because now he's useful to us; just like the neo-Nazis in Ukraine were, and now they're the Azov heroes. And you can go through the list.

All of this is crucial to understanding the discourse in the United States about how propaganda works, about how the term terrorist is such a manipulated, empty term of propaganda that can mean or apply to any one person one day and not to the next. Not depending on whether they've changed, but based simply on who is useful to the United States and who isn't. And most of all, it is vital when talking about US policy at least, Western policy at least, of how we understand foreign countries, to resist what very well may be propaganda based in truth, but is nonetheless propaganda that constantly tries to stir our better emotions by showing us things that they know we will respond to emotionally and keeping everything else away from us that prevents us from thinking clearly, but instead thinking or reacting emotionally in exactly the way that they want. And then once we start realising that we've been misled again and deceived again into another war, into another conflict, by then when our rational faculties return, as happened for most people with Ukraine and Russia or with Iraq, it's too late. The war is already underway. There's no reversing it. They don't need your public support anymore. The narrative, the videos, everything that we're being shown in the wake of what happened in Syria is identical to what we were shown in the wake of Iraq and Syria and Libya and Afghanistan and Ukraine. And people who now understand what was done then should have no problem applying those lessons to what's taking place now.

**END**