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**Aaron Mate (AM):** Welcome to Pushback, I'm Aaron Mate. A former top U.S. official has just acknowledged what has long been the obvious: the US is on the same side as Al Qaeda in Syria and even sees it as "an asset". The official, James Jeffrey, most recently served in the Trump administration as a Special Envoy for Syria and the anti-ISIS coalition and Jeffrey spoke to PBS about Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham or HTS, which now controls the province of Idlib. HTS grew out of Jabhat al-Nusra, which was the official Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, and according to PBS, Jeffrey called HTS an asset to America's strategy in Idlib. Jeffrey added, "They are the least bad option of the various options in Idlib. And Idlib is one of the most important places in Syria, which is one of the most important places right now in the Middle East." Now HTS, under its leader, Mohammed Al Julani says that it's no longer affiliated with al-Qaeda, but U.S. officials have not agreed, while James Jeffrey now calls it an asset his predecessor, Brett McGurk, said in 2017 that Idlib is, in fact, the largest al-Qaeda safe haven since 9/11.

**Brett McGurk:** Look, Idlib province is the largest al-Qaeda safe haven since 9/11, tied directly to Ayman al-Zawahiri. This is a huge problem. It's been a problem for some time. The approach by some of our partners to send in tens of thousands of tons of weapons and looking the other way as these foreign fighters come into Syria may not have been the best approach and al-Qaeda has taken full advantage of it. And Idlib now is a huge problem. It is an al-Qaeda safe haven right on the border of Turkey.

**AM:** Brett McGurk is now back in the White House working under President Joe Biden. And Biden himself has made a similar admission. Speaking in 2014, Biden said that US allies in Syria, like Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, had directly supplied al-Qaeda.

**Joe Biden** Our biggest problem is our allies. Our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria. The Turks were great friends and I have a great relationship with Erdogan, which I've spent a lot of time with, the Saudis, the Emirates, etc.. What were they doing? They were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war. What did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of

dollars and thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad, except that the people who were being supplied were al-Nusra and al-Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world

**AM:** What these US officials have said in public was even more explicit in private. Back in 2012, Jake Sullivan, who is now Biden's National Security Advisor, wrote an email to Hillary Clinton with a very simple message at the top. It said, "See last item. Al-Qaeda is on our side in Syria." That same year, a Pentagon intelligence report warned that, "The Salafis, the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda in Iraq are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria. The West, Gulf countries and Turkey support the opposition, while Russia, China and Iran support the Syrian regime." So James Jeffrey, calling al-Qaeda a U.S. asset in Syria is nothing new, it's just the most blatant public admission of a very open secret. Well, to discuss Jeffrey's comment and the state of al-Qaeda in Syria today, my guest is someone with firsthand experience. Lindsey Snell is a journalist covering the Middle East and North Africa. And in 2016, she was kidnapped by the al-Qaeda group in Syria, what was then called al-Nusra. Lindsay Snell escaped after 10 days. Lindsey Snell, welcome to Pushback.

**Lindsey Snell (LS):** Thanks for having me.

**AM:** Having reported from Syria and having been kidnapped by the al-Qaeda franchise there, I wanted to get your response to James Jeffrey, the former US ambassador, telling PBS that Hay'at al-Sham (HTS), the rebranded al-Qaeda in Syria, is a US asset.

**LS** It was shocking, but not totally shocking, because a year ago, he made similar comments. Something along the lines of: they're not like ISIS planning international attacks. They're just in Syria, just sort of softening the image of HTS already. So it's kind of been like a lead up to now, now actually explicitly saying that they are a US asset.

**AM:** And now we're seeing them undergo a sort of branding campaign. Western journalists are going into the territory writing pieces about HTS and how they rule Idlib. Having been captured by HTS's predecessor inside Syria. What can you tell us about them?

**LS:** It's funny because actually their rebranding campaign started when I was their captive. They changed their name for the first time and they announced their split from al-Qaeda when I was their captive. It of course, didn't actually change anything. And to this day, most of them still call themselves Nusra. People in Syria referring to them, call them Nusra. And I mean, their split from al-Qaeda was really just a

cosmetic thing. It was surface level. It wasn't real. They're still the same group. They're still the same terrorists. They're inflicting Sharia law on everyone in their territories. While the New York Times journalist was there a few weeks ago they executed three people for adultery, stoned them to death. They're the same group. So all of these things that they're doing are cosmetic. I think that the only substantive change they've made is that they're no longer capturing foreigners. I mean, they're no longer trying to take a foreign journalist and holding them for ransom. They're working with Turkey to allow foreign journalists to come and basically propagandize for them.

**AM:** So let me ask you about that New York Times piece, it was written by Ben Hubbard, who is a correspondent based in Beirut. He went into Idlib and he wrote this piece about how HTS rules Idlib. And this is pretty much all he said about their enforcement of Sharia law and their rule over the local population in this way. He said, unlike the Islamic State, the terrorist group that fought both rebels and the government to control an expansive territory straddling the Syria-Iraq border, HTS is not pushing for the immediate creation of an Islamic state and does not field morality police officers to enforce strict social codes.

**LS:** Absolutely false. And actually some of the Syrian national army contacts that I have took great offense to that, because everything that they're doing is the same things that I did, smoking's illegal. They're imposing the full niqab on women. Music, secular music is outlawed. Like I said, they've executed people for blasphemy, for adultery, including blasphemy against HTS. If you're critical of HTS, this could be a death sentence. I mean, the prisons are full of local journalists and activists who oppose them. They're just as bad as ISIS, they're just less vocal about it, I guess.

**AM:** And when you said Syrian National Army, to be clear, that's not the actual Syrian government army, the Syrian arab army. When you're talking about the Syrian National Army that's a coalition of opposition groups that are not officially affiliated with HTS, right?

**LS:** Yeah, that's the so-called Syrian national army, and they're all wholly Turkish backed, Turkish supervised opposition factions.

**AM:** Right, when you saw Julani being interviewed by PBS - Abu Muhammed Al Julani, the head of HTS, he told PBS that his group does not seek to seek jihad abroad, does not seek to attack westerners abroad, and will not use Syria as a base for that. Do you think that that is true?

**LS:** No, I mean, it's not true. And I've interviewed previously Nusra militants in Turkey and in Syria who said that the ultimate goal was the defeat of the West, it is

the ultimate goal of al-Qaeda. Jalani previously said things in support of al-Baghdadi's operations in Iraq, which is not in Syria. Right now it's beneficial for them to appear to be Western friendly. He trimmed his beard and put on a suit but ultimately the goals are the same. It's just that right now it's more beneficial for them to pretend to be Western friendly.

**AM:** And in terms of how HTS rules Idlib, I want to quote you a U.N. Security Council report from earlier this year. It says this: "In addition to taxation of local businesses, HTS maintains a monopoly over the import and distribution of gasoline and diesel fuel. The group's earnings from trading fuel and energy are estimated at approximately one million dollars monthly. HTS is also reported to control distribution of humanitarian aid, which limits direct distribution of goods to the local population by humanitarian organizations. It also confiscates portions of these goods to reinforce HTS patronage networks." Based on your reporting, what can you tell us about that? How HTS controls and limits aid to its own territory?

**LS:** HTS has its own oil company and its own refinery, and in the past, when prices were very high, they've actually stopped civilians and truck drivers from going outside of their territories to get cheaper, affordable gasoline. That's absolutely true. As far as aid goes, every bit of aid that comes into HTS territories goes through HTS first, and they take part of it. Always. Either they take money for the aid distribution or they take a portion of the aid. In terms of food aid, they've taken it, they've put HTS labels on it, and they've given it to their fighters, and the families of the fighters who died, and the families of the ISIS fighters who died as well. So, I mean, it's a total monopoly on everything.

**AM:** And what foreign countries can we say are complicit in this, knowingly allowing HTS to run all this and to profit off of its control of Idlib.

**LS:** First and foremost is probably Turkey, and Turkey lists them as a terrorist organization. But Turkey heavily relies on them and supports them. I mean, they're jointly occupying parts of Idlib with Turkey. Turkey uses them as escorts when they travel around in Syria. So, I mean, that's number one. It's laughable that Turkey lists them as a terrorist organization. Obviously, the US., the U.K., the EU, I mean, every country that has any presence in Syria, outside of the ones on the government side, are completely complicit. I mean, it's very well known what HTS does. And if America, for example, wanted to fight them, Julani would be dead like al-Baghdadi is.

**AM:** When I recently interviewed Robert Ford, the former US Ambassador to Syria, we sparred over the role of the US in the circumstances that led al-Qaeda to take control of Idlib. And what I pointed out is that, whether deliberately or not, US

anti-tank weapons ended up in the hands of al-Qaeda and that was instrumental in their fight to capture Idlib.

**Robert Ford (RF):** You say, Aaron, on this, you're being selective and in some cases in error. The United States, never gave anti-tank weapons to al-Qaeda.

**AM:** Not directly, but they gave it to their allies who then gave it to al-Qaeda or al-Qaeda...

**RF:** Aaron, the number might be half a dozen. The amount of material that Nusra got from the United States wouldn't have lasted them for a day of combat. It's just completely inaccurate to say that the United States was funneling arms to jihadis. I see that complaint all the time, and it's simply not true.

**AM:** Can you give us some of that background, how it is that Idlib is now controlled by al-Qaeda and why Brett McGurk, a US official, calls Idlib the largest al-Qaeda safe haven since 9/11?

**LS:** The US's train and equip program, which was a joint US-Saudi Arabia-Turkey program to train and arm so-called moderate rebels vetted by the CIA, is really what caused all of this. And the rebel factions that they deemed moderate themselves said we're not moderate. There is no such thing as moderate Islam. We are just Muslims. It was just a total fiction and total fantasy. And so the factions that the US heavily armed (including one called Harakat Hazm) were immediately targeted by Nusra and basically disbanded by Nusra, and Nusra raided their weapons stores, their warehouses, and they got TOW missiles and they got trucks and everything else that the US had given these so-called moderate factions. And the militants who were left over in these moderate factions basically all folded into Nusra, and joined Nusra themselves. I mean, it was a total fiction, a total disaster of a program. And it definitely led to Nusra being as dominant as they are now - or HTS, rather.

**AM:** And when I interviewed Ambassador Ford, he tried to draw a distinction between the Free Syrian Army, the US-backed opposition militants, and Nusra. Do you think that that's a fair distinction?

**LS:** Absolutely not, because it's not just that they were allies, or that they are allies. There are territories that are controlled by the now called Syrian National Army, the same as the Free Syrian Army, territories that they control, that Nusra still has total say over, even if they're not technically there. So basically, the Free Syrian Army was subservient to Nusra - in some areas especially, and there's not really a distinction. It's more that Nusra controlled them, especially by 2015, 2016. As Nusra gained more and more territory and really took control of Idlib and became more and more

powerful, they became dominant over the Free Syrian Army, the US-backed Free Syrian Army.

**AM:** So if you could tell us your story for people who aren't familiar with it, when were you captured by al-Qaeda in Syria and what happened?

**LS:** I was captured in July 2016. They came and took me from the house I was staying in, which this is one of the examples of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) being subservient to them. I was in an area controlled by a faction of the Free Syrian Army and they came to this house. Which was the house of a militant, and they were able to take me with no problem. You know, several armed men came and took me to kind of a safe house with, like a prison basement. And I was there for about a week and they told me what they told every foreign journalist that they captured: we think that you were a spy, we have to check you, so on and so forth. They ended up taking me to an actual prison, which had a lot of Syrian soldiers from the actual Syrian army and Kurdish militants. And after that, they moved me to a house with women and children. And eventually, I was able to contact someone in Turkey and coordinate an escape.

**AM:** An escape. You actually escaped, so you fled from where you were being held.

**LS:** I did, yeah, with the help of an Ahrar al-Sham militant Ahrar al-Sham is a Free Syrian Army faction that's really, really allied with HTS now, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra. But most of the Syrian opposition really, really, really hates Nusra now HTS. It's just that they're dominant. So, I mean, I think for that reason, when I asked this Ahrar al-Sham man, why he was willing to rescue me, he just wrote in Google Translate that he hated Nusra.

**AM:** The fact when you were captured you were staying in a Free Syrian Army house, do you think that they told Nusra about you and where you were? Do you think that they gave you up? And by the way, this is a US-backed militant group, the Free Syrian Army.

**LS:** Yeah. And this was a faction that had actually received U.S. Weapons. But I don't think the people in the house I was in gave me up. But I've been told since that basically every neighborhood in oppositional Syria has kind of a neighborhood spy. Certainly, someone gave me up. And had I known before going in just how dominant Nusra had become, I would not have gone.

**AM:** And did you speak to U.S. officials about your experience and communicate to them your experience with an opposition group that they were backing?

**LS:** You know, after I escaped and got to the Turkish border, the second I crossed, Turkey arrested me in the presence of U.S. officials. And after that, you know, as I'm being held in a Turkish prison. And by the way, most of their accusations against me were that I was a CIA agent. They really believed that based on sort of what America did to try to help me when I was captured in Syria. Someone from the U.S. embassy kept asking if I would let the FBI come and debrief me while I was sitting in a Turkish prison being accused of being a CIA agent. And so after that, I was eventually released and deported to America and again, the FBI wanted to debrief me, but no, I've not spoken to them, I'm not interested in speaking to them. I don't think that they can be trusted.

**AM:** Right. So what did you learn about the US level of concern about the fact that they're supporting people who are working with Al Qaeda?

**LS:** The level of surveillance that they had on me was insane. After I'd escaped and before I was able to get from where I escaped to the Turkish border, there were a couple of days, and a couple of days where I'm with this Ahrar al-Sham man and his wife, and obviously on the phone talking to them through my then-husband in America. And if I stepped outside, they could tell me the color and pattern of the hijab on my head. This is the US. Yes, the US. That they have this level of surveillance means that they could have done anything to stop al-Qaeda or previously even ISIS before they did. It's clearly not what they want to do.

**AM:** What do you think they wanted to do?

**LS:** Chaos in Syria benefits them. Clearly, they don't want the Assad government to be in power. They don't want Russia to have any power. So it probably is true that they are an asset to the US strategy in Syria, which is really just to continue sowing chaos and to steal the oil.

**AM:** And on that front, so the US is occupying militarily a third of Syria and it's imposing these murderous Caesar sanctions, I wanted to ask you your response to Secretary of State Antony Blinken. He recently spoke about Syrian children and invoked his own children when he professed to be concerned about the plight of Syrian kids.

**Antony Blinken:** I have two young children of my own. I suspect many members of this council have young children or grandchildren. I think of my kids when I think of the Syrian children we've heard talked about today. I ask you to do the same thing. Think of yours, look into your hearts and then talk to your colleagues. And despite our differences, we have to find a way to do something, to take action, to help people. That is our responsibility and shame on us if we don't need it.

**AM:** I'm wondering your response to what Blinken said and what the impact is right now of these U.S. sanctions on Syria from what you've gathered based on your reporting.

**LS:** I mean, I was in Syria a few weeks ago and, the currency is so unstable and so low and people are suffering so much, it's just heartbreaking. And it's everywhere you look, including the areas the US is occupying. Obviously, the US has never been concerned about Syria's children or Syrian civilians or anything. And any time a US official brings it up, it's generally an excuse to take action against the Syrian government and Russia. And it's a little disconcerting now with Jeffrey making more explicit statements. Obviously, he's no longer an official, but making explicit statements about how HTS is the least bad option. It just doesn't look good.

**AM:** What were people in Syria telling you about what life is like for them right now?

**LS:** I mean, life is hell for them right now, and there's also the issue of COVID-19 and a lack of supplies, a lack of medical care and testing availability. Yeah, everyone's suffering.

**AM:** There are reports about doctors having to smuggle in medical parts because of the sanctions to fix their broken equipment. Have you had any direct experience with that?

**LS:** I was in areas controlled by the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces)...

**Brett McGurk:** Which are the Kurdish forces.

**LS:** The Kurdish forces - still most of their aid and their medical supplies are coming from the government areas. So, I mean, it's just sort of like another step of bad. I mean, the sanctions are kind of hitting them twice because they're getting the second tier of what's left, in terms of medical equipment and medicine and testing supplies.

**AM:** But aren't they protected by the US, the SDF forces?

**LS:** Clearly not, I mean, if you look at the Turkish incursion of 2019, I mean, the US isn't really protecting them.

**AM:** But nominally they're supposed to be protected by the US. Right. My question is, even though they're nominally protected by the US, they're still actually being hit by the US sanctions on the Syrian government.



**LS:** Sure, of course, because a lot of their material, a lot of what they get, is coming from there. I mean, obviously, the crossing with Turkey is now closed. So it's limited to this one crossing in northern Iraq. And a lot of it, they still rely on a lot of it from the government side. So, the sanctions are hitting them too. And obviously, the currency is the same, so as the currency falters, they're hit as well.

**AM:** And so we know that Syria can't access its own oil, it can't access its own wheat, because that's in the areas that the US is occupying. Did you gain any insight into that and what were people saying about that, the fact that the US has such a major impact on Syria right now just by virtue of its military occupation over these key areas?

**LS:** I think that people in government-controlled areas would be a lot more vocal about that because the deal for the oil export is still going to benefit the Kurdish forces and sort of the autonomous administration. It's like the government in the Kurdish area. So I think that they're looking long-term towards the benefits of letting the US export the oil. It's going to benefit them, so I think that they're not going to say anything bad about America.

**AM:** You recently reported on the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. You were on the ground covering it and Syrian mercenaries were being used there in that conflict. Can you give us just a brief summary of how they were used and what these mercenaries told you about how they were treated?

**LS:** Around 2000 so-called Syrian national army mercenaries were sent by Turkey to Azerbaijan and then to Karabakh, which is the disputed territory that Armenia and Azerbaijan were battling over. They told me it was incredibly brutal, like the worst fighting they'd ever seen. They likened all their previous fighting experiences in Syria and in Libya, because most of them had been to Libya previously, where Turkey has also sent them as mercenaries. They said that's like militia fighting but this is like country fighting. So more bombing, heavier weapons, and just more intensity. A couple of weeks into the fight, like 500 of the 2000 just refused to fight altogether. And Turkey eventually sent like 300 of them back to Syria while the war was still happening. They told me that the commanders were Turkmen. The factions that were sent from the Syrian national army were ethnic Turkmen, who Turkey considers Turks. They were treated much better and differently than the arab Syrian National Army mercenaries that went. And they said that none of the Turkmen fighters or commanders died. It was just the Syrian national army arab fighters. They said that the Azerbaijani forces were kind of using them as human shields like they would send them out in front like 200 meters and stand back. And then, if they ran into Armenian snipers, they would just be mowed down. And I mean, I got stories from

people in the Sultan Murad faction of the Syrian National Army who said that, in one day, 11 of them were just taken out by Armenian snipers. So it was a lot worse than what they were expecting. They were also sent before the war even started. So Turkey sent them like five days before helping Azerbaijan launch this offensive on Karabakh. So they weren't expecting it. It was brutal.

**AM:** So going back to Idlib and HTS, there's a headline from April 2020 that says Syrian activists condemn the execution of a teenager for criticizing HTS leaders. It's on the website The New Arab. It talks about a 19-year-old named Mohammed Tanau who was arrested and he had his head chopped off because he criticized Julani, the head of HTS, who PBS just interviewed on social media. But yet we're still seeing calls for engagement with HTS. There's a recent article put out by the International Crisis Group, a big international organization that's consulted often for policy matters. It's called, In Syria's Idlib Washington's Chance to Reimagine Counterterrorism. And it basically proposes that the US lay out some specific benchmarks for HTS, that if HTS achieves these benchmarks, then the terrorism label would be removed. Do you think that's a realistic possibility, that the US actually might get to that point of removing the terrorist label for the supposed former al-Qaeda franchise?

**LS:** I think it's possible and it's terrifying and it's disgusting, but it's definitely possible, and if you just look to The New York Times as sort of like the predictor of things to come in terms of the US regime-change wars. In this recent article from Idlib, they mention one bad thing that HTS did, they haven't mentioned any of the Sharia law aspects that are oppressing the civilians of Idlib or the fact that they're still arresting journalists, they're just not foreign journalists anymore. They're terrible, terrible terrorists. But, yeah, I think it's definitely possible that for America's benefit, maybe they won't be labeled terrorists anymore.

**AM:** Right, the one bad thing they mentioned about HTS in this New York Times article by Ben Hubbard that we discussed earlier is that it shut down the office of an education organization named Shine after its director urged women to refuse polygamous marriages. That's the one example they put of HTS acting in an autocratic manner. They don't mention what you mentioned earlier, stoning three people to death for the crime of adultery.

**LS:** I can't imagine a more benign example of something HTS has done because every day there are worse examples. They've executed a lot of people for criticizing HTS because this is considered blasphemy which, in Sharia law, is punishable by death. Usually, it's blasphemy against God or religion, but also HTS, in HTS-controlled territories. I can't really imagine. It's just that's pure propaganda. It would be unbelievable or not credible if they didn't mention anything bad, so they mentioned the most benign bad thing that they can possibly find

**AM:** And I should correct myself, I actually don't know for sure if that 19-year old Mohammed Tanau, if he was beheaded or if he was executed in some other way. The point is he was executed for the crime of criticizing Julani on social media. And now Julani gets - what looks to be a friendly interview on PBS - although the interview has not been released in full. So Lindsey, as we wrap, your final comments on what we should be looking towards in Syria, what the end game is to all of this, how we get to some kind of resolution? What do you think will happen? The US is staying put right now with this military occupation and the sanctions. Do you think there's a possibility of any of that softening of a US withdrawal of these sanctions being lifted? Or are we just headed to this current status quo for a long time, where you have this heavy US occupation and sanctions, and al-Qaeda controlling a large province?

**LS:** I think it's probably going to be status quo, where some ultimate division of Syria into two or three parts, one of them being the parts that Turkey has annexed and that al-Qaeda is occupying. Yeah, I don't see it improving anytime soon, unfortunately. And that's really a crazy thing.

**AM:** Lindsey Snell, independent journalist, thank you very much.

**LS:** Thank you.

**END**