



Trump, Macron Fawn Over Rebranded Syrian Terrorist?

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Glenn Greenwald (GG): There is this very strange phenomenon that I've actually been talking about and writing about for a long time, which is, I can get myself settled on the right spot as well, which is how malleable and empty this term terrorism seems to be in terms of the way it's applied. It's an obviously extremely central term. In fact, we fought a war for 20 years after 9/11 in multiple different countries in the name of stopping terrorism. We constantly kill people or imprison them based on accusations that they're terrorists. And yet so often, and there's that old saying that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter, we take people who we like and then when we don't like them, we call them terrorists, or we take people we don't like and call them terrorists, and then when we decide that they're actually of use to us, we say, oh, that term doesn't apply anymore. And it obviously leads to the question of what is the origin of this term? Where did it come from? And does it actually mean anything?

Here for the New York Times on May 14th, which was yesterday, there's an article about how Trump met the former – okay, put this headline on the screen because I find it so interesting. It says: *Trump Meets Former Militant Who Now Leads Syria*. Now that word, militant is a very nice word; very benign. You can be militant about anything. I can be militant, wanting to cure cancer. I can be militant about wanting to feed children. Doesn't it really scare anyone. So if you were gonna be accurate with this New York Times headline, you would say: Trump meets former al Qaeda terrorist who now leads Syria. That's how the press and our government and most Western governments have described him until five months ago. A fugitive, monstrous al Qaeda terrorist. The New York Times can't use this headline because of course, people would be then, wait a minute; we fought a war for 20 years against al Qaeda? And now our own president meets and embraces one of their most monstrous terrorists? But this is how language changes so quickly, so instantaneously whenever it serves an advantage to do so. The article reports, quote, "President Trump's conversation with President Ahmed al-Shara", no more Jolani, "who once led a branch of Al-Qaeda was the first time in 25 years that the leaders of the United States and Syria had met". So apparently Bashar al-Assad was

beyond the pale. Nobody could meet him. When Tulsi Gabbard went to meet him, as a member of Congress trying to understand the war there, to this very day, she's maligned over that. That was the main attack on her, one of them in her confirmation hearing, the other being that she has long opposed warrantless eavesdropping on Americans; but oh, you went to Syria, you met with Assad... And yet now that there's an al-Qaeda terrorist running the country, one who was in Iraq killing American soldiers, it's now okay to meet with him?

Here from Reuters, also yesterday: *Syrian leader Sharaa's path from global jihad to meeting Trump*. What a nice path from global jihad to meeting Trump. Quote, "Syria's Ahmed al-Sharaa has transformed himself" – or maybe the West has transformed him – "from al-Qaeda militant to Syrian president in a dramatic political rise capped on Wednesday by meeting with US President Donald Trump. The encounter in Saudi Arabia is a milestone for a man who joined al-Qaeda in Iraq around the time of the 2003 US-led invasion and spent years in US prisons there before returning to Syria to join the insurgency against Bashar al-Assad". Now, you might question, so, he was in a US prison because he was killing US soldiers as part of al Qaeda, he was kept there, and then he was released – we don't usually release people we claim are al Qaeda terrorists, we put them in Guantanamo, where they stay forever. But he was released. And he then went and led the insurgency against Bashar al-Assad, so maybe there was like a deal struck? When he was in a US prison where he agreed to become an agent of the US to help? Remember it was the US policy under President Obama to wage a dirty war to get rid of Bashar al-Assad and we fought alongside al-Qaeda and even ISIS to do it. There's those famous WikiLeaks documents where Hillary Clinton says we're actually fighting on the side of al-Qaeda in Syria. So there's a long relationship between the US and Jolani. Namely that he spent years in a US prison in Iraq. Until they released him to go lead the insurgency to take down Assad.

Quote, "The meeting following Trump's announcement of an end to US sanctions on Syria is a huge boost for Sharaa as he tries to bring the fractured country under his control and revive the economy, and Trump said he was looking forward to normalising ties with Damascus". This is how Trump described him after, quote, "He's got the potential – he's a real leader, Trump told reporters on Air Force One after meeting Sharaa whom he described as a young, attractive guy with a very strong past. Quote, 'He's got a real shot at holding it together', Trump said. Sharaa took power after his Islamist fighters launched an offensive from their enclave in the northwest in 2024 and toppled Assad, whose allies Russia and Iran were distracted by other wars. He was long better known as Abu Mohammad al-Golani, his nom de guerre as commander of the Nusra Front, an insurgent group fighting Assad and for years al Qaeda's official wing in the conflict. He cut ties with al Qaeda in 2016, gradually recasting his group as part of the Syrian revolution rather than global jihad. Sharaa swapped combat fatigues for suits and ties after entering Damascus as Syria's de facto ruler in December 2024, promising to replace Assad's brutal police state with an inclusive and just order". Nice little liberal democracy led by al Qaeda. Now it says there that he stopped being affiliated with al Qaeda in 2016, but all the way up until December, 2024, just again, five months ago, not even five months ago, the US had a bounty on his head for \$5 million because he was an al Qaeda terrorist.

Here from France 24, this is before meeting Trump, on May 6, quote: *Macron to host Syria's al-Sharaa in new leader's first European visit*. "Syria's new interim leader, Ahmad al-Sharaa, will make his first European visit in a meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron on Wednesday, the French presidency said Tuesday, in an effort to bolster the ties between the two countries, despite deeply sectarian violence in Syria". Here from the BBC, this was December 16th: *UK diplomats meet rebel leader in Damascus*. Quote, "British diplomats have held talks with the leader of the Syrian rebel group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, following its ousting of President Bashar al-Assad more than a week ago". That was at a time when the US still had a bounty on its head for \$5 million. Here from Euronews, talking about his transformation once he arrived in Syria. The headline is: *Former al-Qaeda leader al Golani* – this was before they gave him a name change – rebrands as a pluralist amid doubts. "Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly Abu Mohammed al-Golani, has evolved from an al-Qaida affiliate leader to a rebranded figure promoting pluralism as Syria's insurgency topples Assad. Despite his attempts at moderation doubts remain about his democratic intentions". Oh, you mean somebody who was an al Qaeda, essentially their entire adult life, may not actually mean it when he says, yes, we welcome all religions. We love everybody, we're going to be a DEI country – diversity, equity and inclusion; that's the new Syria and I the al Qaeda leader is going to lead that.

Here's a video of how much formality and respect was given to him on his visit to Paris to meet Macron. You see Macron out in front of the presidential palace, greeting him as soon as he steps out of his chauffeured car. They're both wearing very nice suits. Goes out Jolani, Macron goes to greet his car, gives him a very nice handshake. Invites him into the Presidential Palace. Puts his arm around him. They wave to the crowd, they wave to the media. Shake hands again. Do you know how many countries France has bombed as well in the name of stopping al Qaeda? You know we've talked about this before, we've done this many times on our show, where we showed you how essentially for a decade, from 2012 to 2022, all the media in the West referred to the Azov battalion in Ukraine as a neo-Nazi fascist, white supremacists, militant group inside Ukraine. There were bills passed to ensure that they were sanctioned, that they couldn't get any American aid or American money or American weapons. They were considered one of the worst groups on the planet. I mean, they worshipped members of the SS from World War II. And they worshipped leaders who collaborated with the Germans to kill Poles, to kill Jews, and then suddenly, once Russia mass-invaded Ukraine in February 2022, and the Azov battalion became the most effective and most well-trained leaders, the whole discord shifted. No longer would they be referred to as neo-Nazi or extremists or fascists, they were nationalists. And then we saw the same newspapers that spent a decade maligning them as Nazis, suddenly writing fluff pieces about their leaders, glorifying them, it just shows you how quickly they'll just change the propaganda the minute that it suits them. And none of these words have any meaning.

Here was the poster printed on the DOJ site of the now respected and beloved president, and again this was there even after he entered Damascus. There's a picture of him; looking much different, not wearing his suits or ties. And it says: Stop this terrorist. Muhammad Al-Jawlani. And then it says: Reward for justice. And then you see at the bottom, up to a \$10 million

reward. And then there's some small print here that says: Muhammad Al-Jawlani, also known as Abu Muhammad Al-Jawlani, and then several other names that he uses, is the senior leader of the terrorist organisation, the al-Nusra Front. Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria under Jawlani's leadership, ANF has carried out multiple terrorist attacks through Syria, often targeting civilians. The US government is offering a reward of up to \$10 million for information about Al-Jawlani. Absolute confidentiality is assured, and relocation may be available. If you have any information, contact the DOJ.

Now, if this were 2003, I would be like, all right, maybe he got a major reform, he's no, whatever... This was five months ago. And obviously a big part of what happened in Syria as Netanyahu boasted, as was official policy, is that the West, the US, and Israel all wanted Assad gone and this was the person who basically led the insurgency against them. As soon as he took over in Damascus, Netanyahu boasted about how it was the IDF that enabled this to happen. And then Israel proceeded to bomb, massively bomb, all the military assets of Syria, just went in and took land that they wanted. And Jolani did nothing. Because part of the deal obviously was that he would be much more subservient to the US and Israel and the West; using Syrian resources for the West. Same thing we saw in Libya when they took out Gaddafi because they were concerned he was going to nationalise the oil reserves of Libya and use it not for the West's profit, but for the benefit of the Libyan people. That's one thing the West does not tolerate.

Now, what is so interesting about this is that if you were to have given money to Jolani six months ago, you would be guilty of a major felony. Basically giving material support to terror groups. And that's not just abstract. Here from the New York Times in February of 2024, so basically a year ago: *Manhattan Woman Convicted of Using Crypto to Fund Terror Groups in Syria*. And the terror group that she was alleged to have funded was al-Nusra; Jolani's group. So now the West is giving him all sorts of money, but just a year ago, if you gave money, you would go to prison for various serious felony charges. Imagine being in prison because you gave money to Jolani's group or to Jolani, and then not even a year later seeing the entire West unite and say, no, he's not a terrorist, he's a very important and respected world leader who deserves our esteem and respect. And you're sitting in prison because you were convicted not even a year ago of having given him money.

As I said, this is something that I've been writing about a long time, other people have been writing about it a long time as well. Here's an article that appeared in Salon, which is the magazine where I worked and this is August of 2011 and this was actually written by my colleague who became my colleague at The Intercept herself as well, Murtaza Hussain. And the title is: *US politicians' favourite terrorist groups*. And this is what he wrote, quote, "Supporting designated terrorist organisations, especially in the context of the indefinitely ongoing War on Terror, is something for which a great number of individuals in the United States are currently serving lengthy prison sentences. It seems to defy logic that the members of MEK, a group which has attacked US interests all over the world" – which is an Iranian exile group – "are able to stroll the halls of Congress and exercise significant financial influence over US government representatives in order to achieve their objectives. Make no

mistake, the MEK is no less, quote, 'terrorist' than any of the other groups for which one can go to jail for merely having contact with. In addition to openly acknowledging to have killed thousands of Iranians, MEK is directly implicated in the death of American civilians and military officials in Tehran during the 1970s, killing for which no MEK member has ever been brought to justice... The fact that US officials are now openly consorting with them, and receiving funding from them" – huge numbers of American officials were on their payroll of the MEK. It turns out Howard Dean was, and he went around ranting against the Iranian machine, they pay US officials and prominent US political figures and media figures to go around praising them and condemning the Iranian government. They say we do need regime change there because they're just spreading our money around and they are a terrorist group. Quote, "The fact that US officials are openly consorting with and receiving funding from the group with American blood on its hands in order to promote that group's interests is something which may escape the notice of its citizenry, but it is keenly watched by Iranians and others who are looking to gauge the level of integrity and consistency in US policy. The selective application of the label of quote 'terrorist' based on who the US is choosing to fight at any given point is further evidence of the bankruptcy of this term. 'Terrorists', quote-unquote, are those who are interred in CIA black sites, subject to legally sanctioned torture and killed without public outcry; but as the case of the MEK shows the very definition of who is a terrorist is based not upon what acts individuals or groups commit, but how favourably or unfavourably those acts are viewed in Washington".

And of course the most notable example is when the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, which attracted people from all throughout the Middle East, including Osama bin Laden and others, were resisting the Soviet Union's invasion in the 1980s. The US loved the Mujahideen. Heaped all kinds of praise on them. Celebrated them as freedom fighters. And then, when that group turned around and started resisting the US invasion of Afghanistan suddenly those very same people motivated by the very same thing suddenly became evil terrorists that we put into Guantanamo simply for defending Afghanistan against the United States invasion. I mean, how can you not see with the Azov bataillon, the Mujahideen, with Jolani, and so many other examples, that this term terrorist means whatever the government wants it to mean at any given moment, which means essentially that it doesn't actually have any real or fixed meaning. It's as central to our discourse, that word is, as it is meaningless and bereft of any real meaning.

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