

Syria's Al-Qaeda Group No Longer "Terrorist"

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Glenn Greenwald (GG): There's probably no word that has been more significant and influential and central in shaping not just our foreign policy but also our domestic policy, our civil rights, our civil liberties, government powers, than the word "terrorist" or "terrorism". Obviously it became an extremely crucial term after 9/11, an entire war was declared against terrorism, the war on terror. It became the foundation for bombing whoever we wanted, killing whoever we wanted, invading whatever countries, overthrowing governments, but also very aggressively revoking core rights, or at least eroding them with things like the Patriot Act and warrantless surveillance and kidnapping people off the streets and due-process-free imprisonment – all based on the idea that we have terrorists who are threatening us and we have to go after the terrorists. And always the issue was, the word terrorist is a newly invented term over the last many decades. There's a history of how the term has been used. And it really doesn't have a very fixed meaning. Because so often, people we call terrorists one day become freedom fighters the next or vice versa, not depending on what they're doing, they don't change what they are doing, they don't change what they believe, they just change what cause they're serving.

And there's a cliche that I think is very actually illustrative, which is that one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter. We funded and heralded and loved the predecessor to Al-Qaeda, the Mujahideen, in Afghanistan. We funded them, we armed them. They came to the White House. Ronald Reagan heralded them, because at the time, they were our allies fighting against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. And after 9-11, those same groups became the terrorists we had to eradicate, because now they were no longer fighting against the Soviet Union, but against the United States. And to the extent it means anything, I think the common understanding of the word "terrorism" has meant the use of violence against civilians, or the threat of the use of violence against civilians, in order to achieve political aims. I'm blowing up this building, because I want to put pressure on you to stop doing this thing we don't want you to do. We want to force you to leave our country, so we're going to attack civilian infrastructure, or we're going to threaten to do so. That's what terrorism has always meant. Now it means basically nothing. It just means whatever you want it to mean.

But whatever it meant over the last 25 years, one thing was for sure: if anybody was a terrorist, it was Al-Qaeda, and that was what we were told. That was our new existential enemy. It replaced the Soviet Union. It was terrorism, no longer communism. The terrorist group Al-Qaeda that attacked the United States on 9/11 that was hell-bent on attacking the West again. Multiple mass casualty terrorist attacks were blamed on Al-Qaeda, including the 20th anniversary today, July 7th, 2005. Hundreds of British people were killed when Al-Qaeda attacked the London train system and blew up a train. A similar attack in Spain. US assets all throughout the region. Al-Qaeda is the epitome of terrorism. And it wasn't just in Iraq. It wasn't just in Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan. It was also in Syria. We were told Syria had a very dangerous affiliate of Al-Qaeda's. And those Syrian affiliates were put where you think they would be put, which is on the foreign terrorist list, the list of official terrorists. And the leader of that affiliate, that Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, was Muhammad al-Jawlani. And his group was on the list of official terrorist groups which gave the US government power to do whatever they want. And he himself was deemed an Al-Qaeda terrorist. And the government paid \$10 million, offered \$10 million for someone who would kill him or give information about his whereabouts.

And they had that up on their list until yesterday, the foreign official terrorist designation list, until yesterday or actually until this morning, when Marco Rubio issued this announcement on behalf of the US State Department, quote, title: Revoking the Foreign Terrorist Organization Designation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Quote: "In line with President Trump's May 13th promise to deliver sanctions relief to Syria, I am announcing my intent to revoke the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designation of al-Nusrah Front, also known as Hay'at al-Sham (HTS), under the Immigration and Nationality Act. The revocation will be effective tomorrow, July 8th." Which is the last day that Al-Qaeda's affiliates in Syria are designated terrorists, terrorist organizations. "Tomorrow's action follows the announced dissolution of HTS and the Syrian government's commitment to combat terrorism in all its forms. This FTO revocation is an important step in fulfilling President Trump's vision of a stable, united, and peaceful Syria.".

Syria is neither stable nor united nor peaceful. The previous terrorist group and the previous Al-Qaeda terrorists who now lead Syria have overseen the slaughter of Alawite Christians, religious minorities throughout Syria – they haven't changed at all in terms of their tactics, their beliefs. What has changed is that they are willing to be subservient to the US and Israel and to take marching orders from the US and Israel. They allowed Israel to overflight rights when they went and attacked Iran. They're about to join the Abraham Accords where they're going to officially recognize Israel and have an official Syrian – so our new friends in Al-Qaeda are no longer terrorists because now they do our bidding. They're not killing fewer people, they're not respecting the lives of civilians anymore than they did before. They're just working with us instead of against us, which means they're no longer terrorists. That's the only effective operational definition of terrorism.

Here NBC News, December 20th, 2024, not even [seven] months ago, quote: *U.S. to lift the \$10 million bounty on the de facto Syrian leader's head.* "The rebel group leader commits to

preventing terrorist threats to the US and its allies." Right. They're not going to allow terrorist threats to the US though they're still going to commit them in Syria for their own purposes. They're still terrorists. They're still killing civilians for political ends. But we no longer consider them a terrorist organization because they're doing it against people we're fine with them doing it against.

This was on the US Department of State's site on the day that Al-Jawlani entered Damascus. There you see it, it's "Stop This Terrorist". That's the language of the Justice Department. Again, this is not 10 years ago. This is less than [seven] months ago. Stop this terrorist. Here's a picture of him looking all terroristy, on purpose. Here's his name, Muhammad al-Jawlani, and it says reward for justice, up to \$10 million reward. And it talks about how he has long been with Al-Qaeda. I don't know if I can enlarge this, but he's killed Americans. He's used all kinds of terrorism. Here, "Muhammad al-Jawlani", here's the text that's down here at the bottom, "also known as Abu Muhammad al -Golani, also known as Muhammad al-Jawlani, is the senior leader of the terrorist organization, the Al-Nusrah Front, ANF, Al- Qaeda's affiliate in Syria." This is December 2024. "This group is Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria. Under al-Jawani's leadership, ANF has carried out multiple terrorist attacks throughout 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 information, please contact the nearest US Embassy." When he marched into Damascus, I went to the US site and I said "I know where he is. He's in Damascus. Please send my \$10 million." I think I got a form letter saying, no, you have to give us non-public information. That's how absurd all of this was.

Here's Tulsi Gabbard when she was testifying for the Senate Intelligence Committee in January of this year and she was talking about Al-Qaeda's Syria affiliate and al-Jawlani particularly.

Tulsi Gabbard: What unsettles my political opponents is I refuse to be their puppet. I have no love for Assad or Gaddafi or any dictator. I just hate Al-Qaeda. I hate that we have leaders who cozy up to Islamist extremists, minimizing them to so-called rebels. As Jake Sullivan said to Hillary Clinton, quote, "Al-Qaeda is on our side in Syria". Well, Syria is now controlled by an Al- Qaeda offshoot – HTS, led by an Islamist jihadist who danced in the streets on 9/11 and who was responsible for the killing of many American service members.

GG: There was Tulsi Gabbard explaining why she never looked at the Assad government as this mortal enemy because the alternative was Al-Qaeda, which Tulsi was taught was America's greatest existential threat. That's why she went to Afghanistan and Iraq and enlisted in the army to go fight against them because she believed it. And now she's saying you're attacking me because I was sympathetic to the Assad regime which protected religious minorities when the alternative is having Al-Qaeda rule Syria? Here's the memo that Jake Sullivan wrote to Hillary Clinton in 2012 when the Obama administration was running a very expensive and bloody dirty war led by the CIA to try and depose Assad, destroying all of Syria. We only know about this because Wikileaks published it. And one of the parts of the

text was, see the last item, "Al Qaeda is on our side in Syria. Otherwise, things have basically turned out as expected." They were allies in Syria. We just pretended they weren't, and now we're open about the fact that they are. Here is Donald Trump after he met with Jawlani, now a much nicer, more westernized name. That's his war name that they no longer use, now that he took off all of that Middle East clothing and put on an Armani suit. Here's Trump talking about Jawlani, who he had just met, shook hands with, and welcomed while he was in Saudi Arabia.

Interviewer: How did you find the Syrian president?

Donald Trump (DT): Very good, young, attractive guy, tough guy, you know. Strong past. Very strong past, fighter.

Interviewer: Does that worry you at all?

DT: He's got a real shot at pulling it together.

GG: "Real strong, real tough". Yeah, he was an Al-Qaeda leader who the United States wanted to kill so badly that it offered \$10 million for information leading to his arrest. And, you know, Trump does, in his defense, like strong leaders, even if they're dictators. He has respect for President Xi, he has respect for president Putin, for Kim Jong Un, for Nicolás Maduro. If someone's really tough or strong in Trump's view of what strength and toughness is, he has respect for those people. And here he's saying, yeah, he has a strong past. Strong? He was an Al-Qaeda leader. Who, as Tulsi Gabbard said, killed large numbers of Americans, engaged in terrorism, still is overseeing the slaughter of religious minorities, but he's now one of ours. He does what we tell him to do. He serves our interests, so he's officially no longer a terrorist. His Al-Qaeda group is no longer on the list of terrorism.

Back in 2002, this was April of 2002, barely six months after 9/11, Noam Chomsky, to his eternal credit, one of the great things that he did – he was one of very few people immediately willing to stand up after 9/11 and warn of the authoritarianism that was coming in the name of fighting terrorism but also questioning all of the propaganda that was being issued to justify everything that was about to come, including the definition of terrorism. And he was being questioned by this young, very typical Neocon, Evan Solomon, whose every question was obviously basically disputing everything Chomsky was saying from a Neocom perspective. But Chomsky, it was one of the great interviews. I really recommend the whole thing if you want to see what that climate was like and Chomsky's unique ability to dismantle propaganda. I understand people have problems with him because of what he did during COVID. This is 20 years earlier, about a completely different topic, so just try and put that aside. Here is what Chomsky said about the definition of terrorism.

Evan Solomon (ES): How do you distinguish between that kind of what you describe as terrorism and what they are saying Osama bin Laden who's a terrorist make the distinction

Noam Chomsky (NC): That's very simple. If they do it, it's terrorism. If we do it, it's counter-terrorism. That's a historical universal. Go back to Nazi propaganda, the most extreme mass murders ever. If you look at Nazi propaganda, that's exactly what they said. They said they are defending the populations and the legitimate governments of Europe.

ES: Does that disqualify the US from intervening in any other way?

NC: No, it doesn't. No, it doesn't. Look, the Taliban are a terrorist state. That fact doesn't disqualify them from bombing Washington. What disqualifies them from doing that is even if they were Mahatma Gandhi, they shouldn't do it. Nobody except the ultra-right-wing jingoists like Kaplan is comparing atrocities by various countries. What honest people are saying is that we should pay attention to our own crimes and stop committing them. This would be true even if we were killing one person, okay? And it's even more true when we're killing millions of people.

GG: So that's always been the definition of terrorism. It's been a very malleable term. It basically means nothing, even though it was the linchpin of not just the propaganda justifying our foreign and domestic policy for the last 25 years, but also shaping the policies themselves.

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