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US removes \$10 million reward for Hayat Tahrir al Sham leader

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The US State Department removed the \$10 million reward for Abu Mohammad al Jolani, the Specially Designated Global Terrorist who leads Haytat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), which State describes as an Al Qaeda branch. The bounty on Jolani was removed as US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf met with him and other Hayat Tahrir al Sham leaders in Damascus on December 20.

Leaf **argued** that it would be “a little incoherent [...] to have a bounty on the guy’s head” while meeting with Jolani, despite the active designations on him and his group.

Leaf described Jolani, who now uses his real name, Ahmed al Sharaa, in an effort to rebrand and distance himself from his terrorist nom de guerre, “as pragmatic.”

“He came across as pragmatic,” Leaf said. “Of course, we are—we’ve been hearing this for some time, some very pragmatic and moderate statements on various issues from women’s rights to protection of equal rights for all communities, et cetera.”

The Biden administration and the State Department’s about-face took place almost immediately after HTS led the charge to oust Bashir al Assad and his brutal government. HTS and allied forces took Damascus on December 8 after a swift, 10-day-long offensive in which HTS fighters marched southward from the group’s stronghold in northern Idlib province.

In its \$10 million reward for Jolani, the State Department noted that “Under Jolani’s leadership, ANF [the Al Nusrah Front, HTS’s predecessor] carried out multiple terrorist attacks throughout Syria, often against civilians.”

The Department of National Intelligence (DNI) [notes](#) on its website that HTS “seeks to replace it [the Assad regime] with a government guided by a fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic law.”

“HTS uses suicide attacks, guerilla tactics, and small-arms units to conduct attacks,” DNI states. Additionally, Jolani “called for retaliatory attacks against the US-led coalition in response to airstrikes in Syria” in 2014.

Jolani’s path to victory in Syria is steeped in both blood and allegiance to Al Qaeda. He joined Al Qaeda in Iraq after the US invasion in 2003 and battled US forces until being captured and detained for five years at Camp Bucca, a prison that was effectively run by Al Qaeda on the inside. Jolani was “a close associate of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi” before the latter was killed by the US in 2006, according to [The Times of Israel](#).

After his release, Jolani reported to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, who later became the leader of Al Qaeda’s Islamic State of Iraq. Jolani returned to Syria during the so-called Arab Spring and the uprising against Assad and became Al Qaeda’s leader in that country.

Jolani and Baghdadi had a dispute over who was to lead the jihad in Syria. Baghdadi wanted Jolani to report to him, while Jolani sought autonomy. The dispute was brought to Ayman al Zawahiri, Al Qaeda’s emir, who sided with Jolani. This disagreement ultimately led to Baghdadi’s defiance and Zawahiri ejecting the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria from Al Qaeda.