

Washington brings Syria's Al Qaeda in from the cold

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7 April 2021

Ten years after Washington launched a bloody war for regime change in Syria that has left some half a million dead and the country in ruins, the US media has begun an unmistakable propaganda campaign to rehabilitate the principal American proxy ground force in this war, Al Qaeda.

This is the significance of an extraordinary interview conducted by the Public Broadcasting Service's (PBS) *Frontline* program. Its subject is Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, the founder of the Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda. The US State Department has declared Jolani a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist," with a \$10 million bounty on his head.

The interview, to be aired soon on PBS, was conducted in February in Syria's northwestern Idlib province, the last redoubt of the Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias that formed the backbone of the war to topple the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

This war was justified in the name of "democracy" and "human rights," and supported by layers of the pseudo left internationally, who went so far as to proclaim it a "revolution." In reality, it was orchestrated, armed and funded by the US, together with its regional allies Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Israel.

It grew to become one of the largest operations in the history of the CIA, with a reported annual budget of nearly \$1 billion. Washington kept up the pretense that its arms and money were flowing to "vetted" and "moderate" Syrian "rebels." In reality, it was the militias linked to Al Qaeda, which included Islamist fighters from Turkey, Iraq, Libya and as far away as Chechnya and China's Xinjiang region, that dominated the anti-Assad forces and became the biggest beneficiaries of US largesse.

Jolani led the largest of these forces, the Al Nusra Front, Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. In April 2013, he released a recorded message stating, "The sons of Al Nusra Front pledge allegiance to Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri," successor to Osama bin Laden as leader of Al Qaeda, following the latter's death in 2011. At the time, Jolani was working in close collaboration with ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. He severed Al Nusra's formal connection to Al Qaeda in 2016.

The interview conducted by *Frontline*'s Martin Smith is essentially a "media show"—Smith's own words—staged to whitewash the bloody history of the Al Nusra Front's terrorism

in Syria and provide Jolani with a forum for proclaiming the front's current iteration, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), a legitimate political force and natural ally of Washington. The terrorist designation attached to himself and his organization was "unfair" and "political," Jolani said.

Smith asked Jolani to take a pledge: "Will you say here and now then, very clearly, that you as a former Al Qaeda leader ... will not support ... any attacks against the United States?" The Al Qaeda veteran readily accepted.

The HTS leader was also allowed to issue blanket denials of the widespread charges of torture, disappearances, summary executions and severe repression of any form of dissent in the territory in Idlib under control of HTS gunmen. Those who made such charges, he said, were "Russian agents" or "regime agents."

A week before the broadcast, three women and one man, accused of adultery and attempted murder, were stoned to death by HTS security forces in the Idlib city center, one of many such barbaric public executions.

Last month, the United Nations Human Rights Council issued a report on Syria in which it described brutal repression of Idlib's civilian population at the hands of HTS.

"Torture and ill-treatment were widespread," it reported. "Torture was most common in Idlib central prison and its Shahin section, in Harem central prison and Ouqab prison, with methods including severe beatings, placing detainees in a 'coffin' or in a *dulab* (tyre) or suspending them by their limbs. Victims were frequently tortured during interrogation sessions, and held incommunicado to ultimately extract confessions. Some detainees were told to write a testimony dictated to them by the interrogators, or forced to sign or thumbprint a document, with no knowledge of its content. Some detainees died as a result of injuries sustained from torture and the subsequent denial of medical care." The report added that "former detainees described being sexually harassed, forced to strip naked, electrocuted on their genitals and raped in Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham facilities."

And on April 5, the Syrian Network for Human Rights confirmed that "at least 2,246 Syrian citizens are still detained or forcibly disappeared in HTS's detention centers, constituting a grave threat to the detainees' wellbeing, given the spread of

the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic.”

Frontline's bid to rehabilitate Jolani, the chief of this regime, was not a one-off. This was made clear Wednesday with the publication by the *New York Times* of a feature article by its Middle East correspondent Ben Hubbard based on an HTS-sponsored visit last month to Idlib. Hubbard described the area as “Syria’s last bastions under rebel control.”

Comparing Jolani’s Islamist front favorably to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Hubbard writes: “H.T.S. is not pushing for the immediate creation of an Islamic state and does not field morality police officers to enforce strict social codes.” He failed to mention enforcement by means of public stoning and other summary executions, along with imprisonment and torture.

In an attempt to lend an air of normalcy to the regime in Idlib, Hubbard says that the city’s Disneyland restaurant “entices visitors to dine on salads and grilled meat, and to forget their woes with video games, bumper cars, air hockey and stuffed animal claw machines.” That the restaurant, like virtually every other money-making operation in the area, from kidnapping rings to extortion rackets and the hoarding of aid supplies, is run by the HTS, was not shared with the readers of the *Times*.

The sudden flurry of US establishment media interest in the HTS and Abu Mohammed al-Jolani is one more example of Washington’s extraordinary revolving door approach to Al Qaeda, which has repeatedly morphed from an ally and proxy force, to the supposed number one threat to the US “homeland,” and back again.

Al Qaeda got its start in the US-orchestrated war against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan in the 1980s, under the leadership of Osama bin Laden, who collaborated closely with the CIA and Pakistani intelligence. This was part of a longstanding pattern of US imperialism using right-wing Islamist elements to counter the growth of socialist and left-nationalist forces in the Middle East and other predominantly Muslim countries.

After the 9/11 attacks, a “global war on terrorism,” with Al Qaeda ostensibly the primary target, served as the pretext for the invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, which together claimed well over a million lives and turned millions more into refugees. Within the US itself, it provided justification for an unprecedented buildup of police-state infrastructure.

In 2011, Al Qaeda-linked militias once again became US proxy ground forces, this time in the US-NATO war to topple Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi and the CIA regime change war in Syria. And, little more than three years later, after these same forces coalesced into ISIS and overran roughly one third of Iraq, together with large swathes of Syria, they became the pretext for yet another US military intervention and more carnage in the Middle East, which continue to this day.

Now, as the *Frontline* interview with Jolani and the *Times* report from Idlib indicate, the time has come, yet again, for the

rehabilitation and employment of one of the branches of Al Qaeda.

Significantly, the *Frontline* report included a statement by James Jeffrey, who served until November of last year in the Trump administration as both Washington’s Special Representative for Syria Engagement and its Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.

Jeffrey told *Frontline*’s Martin Smith that Jolani and the HTS represent a US “asset” in Syria. “They are the least bad option of the various options on 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,” the ex-envoy said.

Jeffrey apparently had no problem juggling two jobs that involved promoting military intervention in the name of combatting ISIS, on the one hand, and, on the other, seeking to turn an offshoot of ISIS into a US “asset” in Syria.

This policy has clearly only deepened under the new administration of President Joe Biden, which has brought back all of the foreign policy officials who engineered the intervention in Syria in the first place.

The Biden administration’s first military action was launched in February with airstrikes in Syria. It is maintaining and even strengthening US military forces that are occupying the country’s northeastern Deir ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah governorates, the center of Syria’s oil production under the “take the oil” policy enunciated by Donald Trump. Washington’s aim is to deny critical energy resources to Damascus, even as it enforces a brutal sanctions regime that is starving the population and depriving it of vital medical supplies in the midst of the escalating COVID-19 pandemic.

Idlib is key to US plans. In addition to the areas controlled by HTS, it is also occupied by thousands of Turkish troops, while under siege from Russian-backed Syrian government forces. As a US “asset,” the HTS could provide Washington with leverage in resuming the war and shifting Ankara toward a more aggressive policy in relation to Iran and Russia in both Syria and the broader Middle East.

The attempt to rehabilitate Jolani not only exposes the lies, hypocrisy and criminality of US imperialist policy in the Middle East, it is a warning that new atrocities are being prepared in Washington’s quest for hegemony over the region and entire globe.



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