

What's in a Name? U.S. Takes Syria's Al-Qaeda Off Terror Watchlists

By changing its name to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda has managed to secure its removal from the U.S. and Canadian terror watchlists, allowing citizens of those countries to donate money and travel to fight with them.

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It turns out that getting off the U.S.' and Canada's terror watchlist is as simple as changing your name. While the terror watchlist in the U.S. has long been [both secretive](#) and controversial – as [“reasonable suspicion” is enough](#) to label any individual a “terrorist” – terrorist groups tied to al-Qaeda have found that getting off the watchlist only requires minor rebranding.

The terror group, long known to most as Jabhat al-Nusra or the al-Nusra Front, has continued to function as al-Qaeda's branch in Syria long after Daesh (ISIS) renounced its allegiance to the group in 2014. It was [first placed](#) on the U.S. and Canadian terror watchlists in 2012.

But by changing its name to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the group has [managed to secure its removal](#) from terror watchlists in both the U.S. and Canada, allowing citizens of those countries to donate money to the group, travel to fight with them and disseminate the group's propaganda without incident.

In response, **Nicole Thompson** of the U.S. State Department [told CBC News](#) last Monday that while

“we believe these actions are an al-Qaeda play to bring as much of the Syrian opposition under its operational control as possible, [...] we are still studying the issue carefully.”

But the State Department is likely hesitant to label HTS a terror group, even despite the group's link to al-Qaeda, as the U.S. government has directly funded and armed the Zenki brigade, a group that joined forces with al-Nusra under the HTS banner, with sophisticated weaponry.



Zenki Brigade

[As CBC noted,](#)

“For the U.S. to designate HTS now would mean acknowledging that it supplied sophisticated weapons, including TOW anti-tank missiles, to ‘terrorists,’ and draw attention to the fact that the U.S. continues to arm Islamist militias in Syria.”

This is just the latest attempt by al-Nusra to rebrand itself as a “moderate” group, as it has used its commitment to being “anti-ISIS” and “anti-Assad” in order to convince the U.S. and its allies to arm them. Al-Nusra has been described by mainstream media as a “moderate opposition” group fighting against the embattled government of Syrian **President Bashar al-Assad**.

Their efforts have paid off, as the group is being supported to various degrees by foreign governments seeking to overthrow the Assad government. For example, take the words of Qatari **Foreign Minister Khaled al-Attiyah**, who [told the French publication Le Monde](#) in 2015:

“we are clearly against all extremism, but, apart from Daesh [ISIS], all [sic] these groups are fighting to overthrow the [Assad] regime. The moderates cannot say to the Nusra Front ... ‘We won’t work with you.’ You have to look at the situation and be realistic.”

The U.S. government has also accepted the rebranding of al-Nusra in recent years. The U.S. effort to do so began in earnest when former Director of National Intelligence **James Clapper** [stated in 2015](#) that

“moderate rebels” were “anyone who is not affiliated with ISIL [Daesh, ISIS].”

Since then, al-Nusra’s top commanders have asserted that they have received U.S.-made

weapons, such as TOW missiles and tanks, directly from foreign governments supported by the U.S. In a 2016 [interview](#) with the newspaper Koelner Stadt-Anzeiger, al-Nusra unit commander Abu Al Ezz stated that when al-Nusra was

“besieged, we had officers from Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Israel and America here...Experts in the use of satellites, rockets, reconnaissance and thermal security cameras.”

When asked specifically if US officers were present, Al Ezz replied:

“The Americans are on our side.”

This assertion has been [bolstered by evidence](#) that the U.S.-led coalition’s airstrikes in Syria have only focused on Daesh and [intentionally avoided al-Nusra positions](#).

With al-Nusra now officially removed from Western terror watchlists, foreign governments that are opposed to the Assad regime – particularly the U.S. – will be free to fund and arm al-Qaeda as they see fit, making the West’s alleged goal of creating a post-Assad “secular Syria” a remote possibility at best.

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