

Delisting Hayat Tahrir al-Sham: Implications for U.S. Counterterrorism and Syria Policy

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Although skepticism is understandable given the background of those now leading Syria's government and security forces, removing the FTO designation is an unprecedented counterterrorism decision with numerous potential benefits and ripple effects.

Seven months after leading the rebel offensive that ousted Bashar al-Assad, and nearly thirteen years since being designated (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/rally-round-jihadist>) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the U.S. State Department, the group [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/age-political-jihadism-study-hayat-tahrir-al-sham\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/age-political-jihadism-study-hayat-tahrir-al-sham) (HTS) was taken off the list on July 8. Removing the designation was the U.S. bureaucracy's latest step in catching up to President Trump's [May call \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/trump-meets-sharaa-writing-new-chapter-us-syria-relations\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/trump-meets-sharaa-writing-new-chapter-us-syria-relations) for suspending all sanctions on Syria, which came in the context of his landmark Riyadh meeting with former HTS leader and current president Ahmed al-Sharaa. The State Department [explained \(https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/07/revoking-the-foreign-terrorist-organization-designation-of-hayat-tahrir-al-sham/\)](https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/07/revoking-the-foreign-terrorist-organization-designation-of-hayat-tahrir-al-sham/) that it took this action following "the announced dissolution of HTS and the Syrian government's commitment to combat terrorism in all its forms."

More such announcements can be expected in the months ahead as officials continue implementing Trump's policy, likely including eventual congressional revocation of the Caesar sanctions. The FTO news is also historic because it represents the first time since the September 11 attacks that a jihadist organization was taken off the FTO list without being fully defunct—rather, the group's fighters and governance apparatus have become key parts of Syria's transitional government.

Skepticism Is Understandable—But Not Sufficient

On December 11, 2012, the State Department designated (<https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/12/201759.htm>) the HTS predecessor group Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) as an FTO, noting that it was an alias of an Islamic State (IS) predecessor group. The decision stemmed from the 600 attacks that JN had carried out in Syria over the previous year, including 40 suicide bombings and multiple incidents involving improvised explosive devices, often resulting in civilian deaths.

The U.S. government also viewed JN's actions as an attempt "to hijack the struggles of the Syrian people" for the Islamic State's "malign purposes." Yet unlike IS, JN built close ties with the Syrian opposition and anti-regime insurgency instead of trying to monopolize everything. That is why it broke ties with IS and became an official al-Qaeda branch. JN's unique way of working within a broader insurgency also set the path that led to its eventual break from al-Qaeda in July 2016, and to its internal reforms away from global jihadism beginning in 2017, when it consolidated control of northwest Syria. The group's leaders have seemingly transformed even more since establishing a transitional government post-Assad, garnering major international recognition and diplomatic engagements.

Some might be skeptical of delisting HTS given its past association with IS and al-Qaeda. Yet HTS was active for longer as an independent group (7.5 years) than with IS (2.5 years) and al-Qaeda (3 years) combined. This is not to say suspicion is unfounded—after all, HTS initially continued certain terrorist activities after becoming independent, such as assassinating Syrian activist Raed Fares in November 2018. Since 2019, however, there is no evidence of any further HTS terrorist attacks; instead, it joined other rebel factions in focusing its operations on the Assad regime's military and security forces and their backers from Russia, Iran, and Lebanese Hezbollah. Further signaling the group's break from the global jihadist movement, both IS and the top ideologue associated with al-Qaeda, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, have long viewed HTS leaders and members as apostates.

Another understandable criticism of HTS is that it resorted to authoritarian rule in Idlib province for years, committing human rights violations such as torturing prisoners. More recently, the new Syrian military—which is led by former HTS officials and includes many of the group's former fighters—was involved in the massacres committed against Alawites (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrias-transitional-honeymoon-over-after-massacres-and-disinformation>) this March.

Yet human rights violations are different from terrorism and should not necessarily be linked to an FTO designation. There are other mechanisms better suited to dealing with those issues, such as other forms of sanctions if Washington ever deemed them relevant and necessary. U.S. officials should also be emphasizing the need for a truth and reconciliation commission in Syria for past victims of JN/HTS political violence. Hopefully, the Sharaa government's forthcoming fact-finding report on the March massacre can provide an avenue to pursue these and other transitional justice efforts in all of Syria's communities. Meanwhile, those who support removing HTS from the FTO list can cite substantial evidence from the past six years that the group truly quit the terrorism business.

Next Steps After a Historic Counterterrorism Decision

Prior to removing the HTS designation, the State Department had previously taken only five other jihadist groups off the FTO list: Algeria's Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in October 2010, the Moroccan Islamic Combat Group in May 2013, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group in December 2015, Egypt's al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah in May 2022, and the Palestinian group Majlis Shura al-Mujahedin Fi Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis that same month. Unlike HTS, all of these other groups were fully defunct.

A crucial question going forward is whether the U.S. government will also delist smaller foreign fighter groups that

have been folded into the new Syrian military. Before making any such decisions, the Trump administration needs to make serious analytical intelligence assessments on any continued links that these elements may have to foreign fighter networks and/or terrorist activity abroad.

Meanwhile, Washington should ask fellow Security Council members to remove HTS from the UN's terrorism list. China will likely push back on this effort given that Uyghur foreign fighters are among those folded into the new Syrian military. Yet without a UN delisting, the Treasury Department cannot remove HTS or its leaders from the Specially Designated Global Terrorist list. Outside of the terrorism question, U.S. officials must also decide whether to move from de facto recognition of Syria's transitional government to official de jure recognition. If so, they should consider asking the UN to do the same.

In broader U.S. policy terms, delisting HTS could provide an alternative political path for jihadists to gain legitimacy if they follow the sort of transformation HTS has undergone over the past eight years. Among other shifts, HTS renounced the global jihadist movement and all of the parent organizations to which it had previously pledged *baya* (allegiance); condemned any individuals or groups involved in external operations, including terrorist attacks against Western countries; fought against terrorist groups both before

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jihadi-counterterrorism-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-versus-islamic-state>) and after **(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-syrian-governments-fight-against-islamic-state-hezbollah-and-captagon>)** toppling Assad; ended its moral policing programs; and engaged minority communities in a non-hostile manner. In the Sahel, the al-Qaeda branch Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) has evidently been following the post-Assad transition in Syria closely and might adopt the HTS template. Delisting HTS also shows that when individuals and groups change their behavior, the United States is truly willing to update its policies; in other words, the designation process is not purely political and is based on legitimately derived intelligence.

In Syria, the U.S. announcement could give local residents and those in the diaspora a greater opportunity to engage or join up with the new government. Many diaspora Syrians living in Western countries have been particularly reticent to work with the new authorities or return to their homeland due to concerns about how the HTS designation might affect them or their family members. Delisting the group could help bring more such individuals into the government, including people with higher qualifications and/or diverse backgrounds.

Of course, the FTO decision is just one of many measures needed to fully implement President Trump's call for removing U.S. sanctions on Syria, including further State and Treasury Department actions, separate legislative changes in Congress, and adjustments to the export controls **(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/trumps-first-steps-syria-were-good-now-he-must-keep-china-taking-advantage>)** managed by the Commerce Department. Regardless of how far those efforts go, delisting HTS is a major signal of the changing relations between the United States and Syria, and another step on Syria's path toward a new era.

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