

From Cell to Summit: Jolani Sits Down With His Ex-Captor in U.S.

NEW YORK (Dispatches) -- Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, the former Al-Qaeda and Daesh commander and current de facto ruler of Damascus under Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), made a rare appearance on the world stage at the United Nations General Assembly in New York City. His presence marks a significant moment, as HTS remains officially affiliated with extremist groups Al-Qaeda and Daesh, yet has recently seen a surprising shift in relations with Western powers, including the United States.



HTS head Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, left, speaks with former U.S. Army General David Petraeus during the Concordia Annual Summit in New York on Sept. 22, 2025.

Jolani and HTS aligns with a widely held belief among analysts that Western intelligence agencies, including those of the United States, played a key role in the creation and support of takfiri extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda and Daesh. These groups were initially cultivated to destabilize the region and further geopolitical ambitions in West Asia. Now, the same intelligence networks appear to be repeating this approach through

al-Jolani and HTS, using them as instruments in ongoing efforts to reshape regional power balances. During the Concordia Annual Summit, held alongside the General Assembly, al-Jolani was interviewed alongside retired U.S. General David Petraeus, a former CIA director who once oversaw the detention of al-Jolani when he was a militant opponent during the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Petraeus acknowledged the “dra-

matic transformation” of al-Jolani’s role from insurgent to political leader, despite the ongoing controversies surrounding HTS. Al-Jolani framed his militant past as a fight for a “noble cause” and emphasized his commitment to defending Syria from chaos and external threats. He highlighted ongoing security talks with Israel, based on a 1974 disengagement agreement, aimed at preventing further conflict despite over a thousand Israeli airstrikes since the fall of the Assad government. He also urged the U.S. to lift sanctions under the Caesar Syria Civil Protection Act and called for protection of minorities, including Kurds, within a unified Syrian state—while insisting that only government forces should bear arms. Al-Jolani’s appearance and the U.S. overtures toward HTS underscore a complex and controversial recalibration of Western policy in Syria, reflecting deeper geopolitical strategies rooted in past interventions and ongoing ambitions in the region.

Leader...

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health, nutrition, research, and education.” He noted the advantages of nuclear power as “much cheaper and environmentally friendly energy,” with long lifespans and multiple benefits, a reason why many developed countries rely on nuclear plants, while Iran’s power plants mainly use costly gasoline and gas. The Leader recounted Iran’s nuclear journey: “We did not have this technology and our needs were unmet by others, but with the efforts of determined managers and senior officials, we began progress over 30 years ago, and now we are at an advanced level of enrichment.” He clarified Iran’s position on enrichment levels: “Some countries aim for 90% enrichment to build nuclear weapons. We, however, do not have nuclear weapons and have chosen not to build or use them. We have raised enrichment to 60%, which is very good.” Iran is now among “10 countries with uranium enrichment industries out of more than 200 globally,” Ayatollah Khamenei said, highlighting the importance of training skilled scientists and researchers. “Today, dozens of top scientists, hundreds of researchers, and thousands of trained personnel work in nuclear fields, yet the enemy thinks bombing some facilities or threatening attacks will destroy this technology in Iran.”

The Leader recalled decades of failed pressure from powerful countries to force Iran to abandon enrichment, affirming, “We did not and will not surrender, and we will not yield to pressure in any matter.” He criticized U.S. demands shifting from limiting enrichment to forbidding it altogether. “The U.S. side previously said do not have high enrichment and transfer enriched products abroad, now they insist on no enrichment at all. This means to destroy this great achievement made through constant investment and effort, but the proud Iranian nation rejects this and counters those who say it.”

Regarding negotiations with the U.S., Ayatollah Khamenei acknowledged differing views but urged careful reflection. “In the current situation, negotiating with the U.S. is pointless; it does not benefit national interests, does not remove harm, and causes significant, sometimes irreparable, damage.” He explained the U.S.’s predetermined goals: “They want negotiations where the result is the cessation of nuclear activities and enrichment in Iran. Sitting at such a table means accepting dictation, coercion, and the enemy’s will.”

He added that U.S. officials recently even demanded Iran give up short- and medium-range missiles, effectively disarming the country. “These demands stem from ignorance of the Iranian nation and Islamic Republic,” Ayatollah Khamenei said, adding in a local idiom, “Such words are bigger than the mouth of the speaker and not worthy of attention.” He described accepting U.S. threats as a sign of weakness and surrender, which only emboldens further demands: “Today they say if you enrich uranium, we will do this or that; tomorrow, missile possession or foreign relations will be used to force Iran to retreat.” “No honorable nation accepts negotiations accompanied by threats, and no wise politician endorses it,” he stressed.

Referring to the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA), he called U.S. promises “lies” and recalled warning officials at the time: “Ten years is a long time, a whole lifetime—why accept it? They accepted it, but now, after 10 years, not only is our nuclear file not normalized, problems at the Security Council and IAEA have increased.” He condemned the U.S. for breaking commitments, withdrawing from the deal, and “tearing up the agreement despite Iran’s fulfillment of obligations,” warning that negotiating with such a partner leads to national weakness and loss of dignity.

Ayatollah Khamenei stressed that while he is not currently considering talks with Europe, the U.S. has consistently broken promises, lied, threatened militarily, and assassinated Iranian figures like General Qassem Soleimani or bombed Iranian sites. “Can we trust such a partner for negotiations?” he asked rhetorically, concluding: “Negotiations with the U.S. over the nuclear issue, and perhaps other issues, are a dead end.” Though the current U.S. administration may find negotiations useful for display and forcing Iran to the table, Ayatollah Khamenei said, “For us, this negotiation is pure harm and has no benefit.” The Leader underscored that the only path to progress is strengthening the country in all aspects: military, scientific, governmental, structural, and organizational. “Wise and devoted experts must find and pursue ways to strengthen the country because a strong nation will no longer face threats.” He called for reliance on God and the Imams and for mobilizing national resolve, expressing confidence that “with God’s help, these efforts will succeed.”

Taliban Double Down on Rejecting Trump’s Claims to Bagram

KABUL (Dispatches) -- A senior Taliban official on Tuesday dismissed U.S. President Donald Trump’s demand that Kabul hand back Bagram air base, insisting the facility is an inseparable part of Afghanistan. “Bagram is part of Afghanistan’s territory. It is no different from any other piece of Afghan land. We will never agree to bargain away or hand over any part of our country,” chief Taliban government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said, quoted by Al Arabiya English. He added that “Afghans are extremely sensitive about occupation, and no Afghan will ever allow their land to be taken or controlled by outsiders – not even an inch.” Bagram, located north of Kabul, was the largest U.S. military installation in Afghanistan and the hub of its two-decade war against the Taliban. U.S. forces abandoned it in July 2021, weeks before the Taliban’s return to power. Trump on Saturday threatened punishment if the base is not returned. “If Afghanistan doesn’t give Bagram Airbase back to those that

built it, the United States of America, BAD THINGS ARE GOING TO HAPPEN!!!” he wrote on Truth Social. In response to Trump’s threat, Mujahid said: “For twenty years under U.S. occupation, Afghanistan experienced ‘bad things’ – not for a day, but continuously for two decades. The Americans should not forget that bad actions trigger bad reactions. In the end, they were forced to withdraw their troops from Afghanistan. Afghanistan is not a country that can be occupied or subdued. They should engage with Afghans politically, diplomatically, and rationally.” The spokesman confirmed talks with U.S. officials but stressed they have focused on prisoner exchanges, diplomatic relations, and economic investment – not Bagram, which he described as non-negotiable. Trump said on Thursday the U.S. was trying to regain Bagram because the Taliban “need things from us.” Asked about this, Mujahid acknowledged Afghanistan seeks foreign investment, including from the U.S., but said that does

not mean Bagram is for sale. “Afghanistan does not, and will never, put forward any demands that involve relinquishing part of its territory in return. No such request has been made from our side, nor is there any need for it,” Mujahid said. Trump has cited Bagram’s proximity to China as a reason for wanting to retake the base. He has also complained about Beijing’s growing influence in Afghanistan. “One of the reasons we want the base is, as you know, it’s an hour away from where China makes its nuclear weapons,” the U.S. president said last week. Mujahid said Afghanistan wants to have good ties with both China and the U.S., adding that Kabul pursues a “balanced, economy-centered foreign policy.” “Just as we want relations with China, we also want ties with the U.S. Just as we want ties with Russia, we want ties with Europe. Afghanistan will not allow its territory to become a battlefield between rival powers,” he said. “Bagram is no different from any other part of Afghanistan. We will never allow it to belong to anyone

– not to China, not to the U.S., not to any other power. And the claim that Bagram is just an hour from China is false. In reality, it is hours away by air from China. They have received incorrect information,” Mujahid added. The Taliban official said Afghanistan remains open to engagement with Washington. “Afghanistan has already taken the necessary steps for relations... It now depends on how the U.S. responds. If they value rationality, diplomacy, and economic cooperation, Afghans are ready to build good relations with them, as we seek with other countries,” he said. “But if they insist on Bagram, coercion, or occupation, then Afghanistan has its own position. Defending our country, our national honor, and our people’s values was our duty in the past twenty years – and it will remain our duty in the future.” At the height of U.S. control, Bagram resembled a small town, complete with fast-food outlets and supermarkets, and hosted visits by presidents including Barack Obama in 2012 and Trump in 2019.

Oil Flow Stalls Despite Baghdad’s Deal With Kurdistan Region

BAGHDAD (Reuters) -- Pipeline oil exports from Iraq’s Kurdistan region to Turkey had yet to restart on Tuesday despite hopes of a deal to end the deadlock, as two key producers asked for debt repayment guarantees. The deal between Iraq’s federal and Kurdish regional governments and oil firms aims to resume exports of about 230,000 barrels per day of oil from Kurdistan to the global market via Turkey, halted since March 2023. Iraq’s cabinet met on Tuesday with the deal on the agenda, oil officials said. It was not immediately clear if it would go ahead without DNO and Genel’s participation. Bijan Mossavar-Rahmani, executive chairman of Norway’s DNO, the largest producer in the semi-autonomous Kurdish region, proposed “easy fixes that can be quickly agreed” to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), DNO said, without saying what they were. Its UK-based joint venture partner Genel said it had yet to sign as it wanted certain adjustments,

and assurances on repayments of arrears. Kurdistan has accumulated around \$1 billion in arrears to producers. DNO’s estimated share of overdue receivables is about \$300 million. “Importantly, as the largest producer, the arrears owed to us by the KRG dwarf those of many of the others,” Mossavar-Rahmani said. The Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline shut after the International Chamber of Commerce ordered Turkey to pay Iraq \$1.5 billion in damages for unauthorised exports by the KRG. Turkey is appealing but says it is ready to restart the pipeline. Reuters reported last week that Iraq, OPEC’s second-largest producer, had given preliminary approval to a plan to restart exports from Kurdistan. In the interim plan, the KRG commits to delivering at least 230,000 bpd to Iraq’s state oil marketer SOMO, while keeping an additional 50,000 bpd for local use. An independent trader would handle sales

from Turkey’s Ceyhan port using SOMO’s official prices. Each month, SOMO would allocate crude equivalent to the value of Kurdish deliveries, calculated by multiplying volumes by \$16 and dividing by SOMO’s Kirkuk price to Europe. For each barrel sold, \$16 would be transferred to an escrow account and distributed proportionally to producers. The remaining revenue would go to SOMO. Oil prices rose on reports of the deal stalling, reversing earlier losses on oversupply concerns. Iraq has frequently produced above the level agreed with OPEC+ and earlier this month was one of several countries that OPEC said would cut output through June to compensate for past overproduction. Iraq is meant to scale back a cumulative 1.4 million bpd between August 2025 and June 2026. Iraq exports around 3.4 million barrels of oil per day from its southern ports.