

UK diplomats meet rebel leader in Damascus

Increasing efforts are being made to engage with HTS, which overthrew the Assad regime earlier this month.

By Kathryn Armstrong

Dec 17, 2024 02:06 AM · 2 min. read · [View original](#)



Reuters

British diplomats have held talks with the leader of the Syrian rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), following its ousting of President Bashar al-Assad more than a week ago.

Images posted on social media by the group's military operations department showed HTS leader Ahmad al-Sharaa - formerly known as Mohammed al-Golani - meeting senior officials in the Syrian capital, Damascus.

Among those photographed alongside him was Ann Snow, the UK's special representative for Syria.

HTS said the delegation had discussed "the latest developments" in the country.

Al-Sharaa also gave [an interview to the Times newspaper](#) in which he called on the West to lift all sanctions imposed on Syria under the Assad regime - including the designation of HTS as a terrorist organisation.

"They should lift all restrictions, which were imposed on the flogger and the victim - the flogger is gone now. This issue is not up for negotiation," he said.

Monday's talks with the British diplomats come after Foreign Secretary David Lammy revealed the government had established "diplomatic contact" with

HTS, which the UK considers to be a terrorist organisation.

Speaking about his hopes for Syria's new leaders, Lammy said: "We want to see a representative government, an inclusive government. We want to see chemical weapons stockpiles secured, and not used, and we want to ensure that there is not continuing violence.

"For all of those reasons, using all the channels that we have available, and those are diplomatic and of course intelligence-led channels, we seek to deal with HTS where we have to."

The government has announced a £50m humanitarian aid package for vulnerable Syrians, including refugees in the region.

The UN has estimated that at least 374,000 Syrians have been displaced by the fighting that led to the topping of Assad, on top of the millions already made homeless by the country's civil war.

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