

US Downplays a New Syrian Massacre

Exclusive: The Obama administration claims Syrian rebels in Ahrar al-Sham deserve protection from government attack although they have close ties to Al Qaeda and joined its official Syrian affiliate in a slaughter of Alawites, writes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

On May 12, at dawn, members of Al Nusra and an allied Syrian rebel group known as Ahrar al-Sham stormed the Alawite village of Al-Zahraa, reportedly killing 19 people and abducting 120 others. In typical Salafist fashion, Ahrar al-Sham then posted a grisly YouTube video showing jihadis chanting *Allahu akbar* – “God is great” – and pointing in triumph to a bloody female body sprawled across the floor.

The incident, which occurred about 10 miles north of Aleppo, couldn’t have been more embarrassing for the United States since, just a day earlier, it had blocked a Russian proposal to formally designate Ahrar al-Sham as a terrorist group.

Under intense questioning, State Department spokesman John Kirby grew visibly flustered as he struggled to defend US policy.

“I’m not going to get into internal deliberations one way or the other,” he said of the discussions among the 17 members of the International Syria Support Group, the United Nations body in charge of Syrian peace talks in Vienna. When a reporter from the “Russia Today” TV network demanded to know why, he sputtered:

“I’m telling you – look, you’re putting – I love how you do this, try to put everything on the United States. The International Syria Support Group is an international – it represents the international community. Iran is a member. Russia is a member. Saudi Arabia – I could go on and on and on. All of them collectively made this decision.”

This was nonsense since it was the U.S. that led the charge against the resolution to classify Ahrar al-Sham as terrorist and Russia that was forced to back down. Kirby was simply dodging the issue. But if his inability to take responsibility shows anything, it is how uncomfortable at least some Washington officials have become with the Obama administration’s Syrian policy.

Obama’s Quagmire

And it’s no wonder. Syria is Obama’s Vietnam, a quagmire that grows messier and messier the harder he tries to escape – and Ahrar al-Sham shows why. One of the

largest rebel factions in Syria, the so-called "Free Men of Syria," began in 2011 as more or less an Al Qaeda spin-off with Mohamed Baheya, a long-time aide to Osama bin Laden and his successor Ayman al-Zawahiri, occupying one of the group's top spots. But for tactical reasons, it chose to adopt a more moderate tone.

Last July, for instance, it published op-eds in the Washington Post and the London Telegraph declaring that Syria should not be controlled "by a single party or group" and that any future government should aim at "striking balance that respects the legitimate aspirations of the majority as well as protects minority communities and enables them to play a real and positive role in Syria's future."

It sounded reasonable enough, especially once Robert S. Ford, Obama's former ambassador to Syria, followed up a few days later with an article for Washington's Middle East Institute arguing that Ahrar is worth dealing with because it believes that religious minorities should be allowed to hold low-level political positions provided "they possess the right qualifications."

Did the White House take its ex-ambassador's advice? The answer, all too typically, was yes and no. Aware that the group opposes democratic self-rule and believes in imposing shari'a at gunpoint, Obama kept it at an arm's length. But at the same time he resisted pressure to classify it as terrorist and made no objection when it joined forces with Al Nusra, Al Qaeda's official affiliate in Syria, to form a new coalition calling itself Jaish al-Fatah, or Army of Conquest.

When Turkey and Saudi Arabia supplied the new alliance with U.S.-made TOW missiles so it could launch a major offensive in Syria's northern Idlib province in March 2015, the administration held its tongue as well. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Climbing into Bed with Al-Qaeda."]]

It was a policy of neither-nor that allowed the administration to maintain "plausible deniability" while doing nothing to ruffle the feathers of Ankara or Riyadh as they cheered Ahrar al-Sham and Al Nusra on.

Besides, Turkey and Saudi Arabia had a point. However bigoted and reactionary, Ahrar al-Sham was a large and effective force at a time when secular rebels were increasingly rare. As long as the White House continued to back "regime change," it couldn't help collaborating with distasteful groups that were nonetheless effective on the battlefield.

The result, as Kirby's dismal performance shows, has been to play down atrocities, plead ignorance, and then, when that doesn't work, change the

subject to Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad alleged misdeeds instead.

When asked about reports that Ahrar al-Sham militants were “comingling” with Al Nusra – which is to say fighting side by side with Al Qaeda – State Department spokesman Elizabeth Trudeau replied on May 11 that “it’s very difficult to tease that out” because information is incomplete.

When asked who was to blame for the atrocities in Al-Zahraa, her colleague Kirby refused to say two days later because “we don’t have a whole lot of specific information about these attacks right now.” Three days after that, he was still reluctant to assign blame because, he said, the facts remained up in the air: “The only other thing I would say is regardless of who was responsible for this attack, there’s no excuse for killing innocent civilians, none whatsoever.”

Knowing Nothing

If the State Department was in no hurry to find out, it was because it didn’t want to know. “We are working with all members of the ISSG,” Kirby went on, “to use the appropriate amount of influence that they have ... over groups in Syria to get everybody to abide by the cessation.”

If Ahrar al-Sham was guilty of mass murder and abduction, then the U.S. would use its influence to see to it that its behavior was less ... extreme. What’s going on here? Is Ahrar al-Sham playing the U.S. for a fool? Or is the Obama administration using such groups to advance its strategic goals?

The answer is a bit of both. The best way to understand bizarre behavior like this is to see it in the context of a vast imperial breakdown that is now unrolling across much of the Middle East.

America’s two main partners in the great Syrian misadventure are both in a state of deepening crisis. Not only is Turkey lurching toward dictatorship under an increasingly authoritarian President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, but its economy is crashing as well. The Istanbul stock market fell eight percent after Erdogan forced Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu out of office on May 5 while the Turkish lire fell nearly six percent in a single day. Corporate bankruptcies are up, growth is down, and tourist income is falling amid bombings and civil war in the Kurdish southeast.

But America’s other partner – Saudi Arabia – is even worse as it lurches from one disaster to the next. The war in Yemen is costing the kingdom and its Sunni Arab allies an estimated \$200 million day, with the lion’s share borne by Riyadh. This is money that the Saudis can ill afford given a budget deficit projected to reach 13.5 percent of GDP this year due to an 18-month slump in oil prices.

Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's "Vision 2030," his grandiose economic plan for weaning the kingdom off oil, is meeting with widespread skepticism while the kingdom is so short of cash that it is considering paying contractors with IOU's. When the Binladin Group, the kingdom's largest construction company, laid off 50,000 foreign employees late last month, workers responded by rioting and setting fire to seven company buses. (Yes, Osama bin Laden was a member of the family that owns Binladin Group.)

Politically, the news is nothing short of ghastly. Under the late King Abdullah, the kingdom rapidly descended into fear and paranoia as it sent troops into neighboring Bahrain to crush democratic protests by the country's 70-percent Shi'ite majority and funneled billions of dollars to anti-Assad rebels in hopes of toppling Syria's pro-Shi'ite government.

Saudi Extremism

But where Abdullah was actually a mild reformer, believe it or not, his brother, Salman, who took over in January 2015, is a hardliner whose answer to criticism by Western human rights groups was to step up the number of public executions immediately after taking office and then doubling them again in 2016. Salman's March 2015 agreement with Erdogan to supply Al Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and other jihadist groups with TOW missiles was in keeping with this increasingly xenophobic mindset.

It was the response of a beleaguered monarch convinced that Shi'ite militants are pressing in on the kingdom from all sides and that the only way to hold them off is by stepping up aid to Al Qaeda and other Sunni extremists.

But such efforts have only added to the kingdom's woes. While Al Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham were able to eke out a short-term victory in Syria's northern Idlib province, the only effect was to bring Russia into the war and tip the scales back in favor of Assad.

As a result, the Saudi kingdom now finds itself back on the defensive in Syria as well as in Yemen where the war against Shi'ite Houthi rebels is hopelessly stalled. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's regional rival Iran is rebuilding its ties to the world community after the April 2015 nuclear accord with the U.S. The more the kingdom struggles to assert itself, the more vulnerable its position grows.

"Were the Saudi monarchy to fall, it might be replaced not by a group of liberals and democrats but rather by Islamists and reactionaries," warned Fareed Zakaria last month in the *Washington Post*. This is the nightmare that causes policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic to wake up in a cold sweat.

With oil prices off more than 50 percent from their peak in mid-2014, Saudi

Arabia's vast oil fields are worth less and less. But the prospect of a quarter of the world's proven fossil-fuel reserves coming under the control of Al Qaeda or ISIS (as Islamic State is also known) is still too much to bear. So something – anything – must be done to maintain the status quo.

Buying Time

Thus, the administration dithers and stalls in the hope that a magic solution will somehow appear. Obviously, Obama made a big mistake in August 2011 in calling on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down. With Arab Spring demonstrations erupting across the country and the Baathist regime seemingly nearing a breaking point, it seemed like an easy call. But it wasn't.

Five years later, Assad is still in power while Obama finds himself on the hook to the Saudis, who want to see their bête noire toppled at all costs and are therefore determined to hold the U.S. to its word. Obama can't afford another war in the Middle East or a military showdown with Russia.

He also knows that the Free Syrian Army, America's favorite rebel faction, is a hollow shell no matter how much money and materiel the CIA sends its way. So he finds himself cooperating in one way or another with dangerous Sunni jihadists who, ideologically speaking, are no different from the terrorists who brought down the World Trade Center on 9/11.

The upshot is a policy that makes no sense other than as a delaying tactic. Obama bombs Al Nusra to show he's still serious about beating back Al Qaeda but includes its inseparable ally, Ahrar al-Sham, among the "non-terrorist" groups exempt from Syrian government attack under the terms of the May 5 Aleppo ceasefire agreement. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Secret Behind the Yemen War.](#)"]

Obama condemns terrorism but maintains back-channel communications with Ahrar al-Sham even though it's nothing more than Al Qaeda-lite. He bombs Islamic State to show that he's serious about combating ISIS but gives it a free pass whenever it goes up against Assad. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[How US-Backed War on Syria Helped ISIS.](#)"]

Obama calls for peace but refuses to condemn those responsible for atrocities like those in Al-Zahraa. Finally, Obama calls for a negotiated settlement but threatens to impose something called "Plan B" if Assad doesn't step down. That mysterious escalation could mean [dividing the country along ethnic or religious lines, arming the rebels with portable anti-aircraft weapons known as Manpads,](#) or something else entirely.

In truth, Obama is just trying to keep the lid on until Jan. 20 when the Syria

mess becomes somebody else's problem. At that point, he may well wind up on the Saudi payroll like Bill and Hillary Clinton or Tony Blair – assuming, that is, that the entity known as Saudi Arabia still exists.

Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace).
