

# Al Qaeda's Ties to US-Backed Syrian Rebels

**Exclusive:** The U.S. is demanding the grounding of Syria's air force but is resisting Russian demands that U.S.-armed rebels separate from Al Qaeda, a possible fatal flaw in the new cease-fire, writes Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

The new ceasefire agreement between Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, which went into effect at noon Monday, has a new central compromise absent from the earlier ceasefire agreement that the same two men negotiated last February. But it isn't clear that it will produce markedly different results.

The new agreement incorporates a U.S.-Russian bargain: the Syrian air force is prohibited from operating except under very specific circumstances in return for U.S.-Russian military cooperation against Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, also known as Daesh, ISIS or ISIL. That compromise could be a much stronger basis for an effective ceasefire, provided there is sufficient motivation to carry it out fully.

The question, however, is whether the Obama administration is willing to do what would certainly be necessary for the agreement to establish a longer-term ceasefire at the expense of Daesh and Al Qaeda.

In return for ending the Syrian air force's operations, generally regarded as indiscriminate, and lifting the siege on the rebel-controlled sectors of Aleppo, the United States is supposed to ensure the end of the close military collaboration between the armed groups it supports and Al Qaeda, and join with Russian forces in weakening Al Qaeda.

The new bargain is actually a variant of a provision in the Feb. 27 ceasefire agreement: in return for Russian and Syrian restraints on bombing operations, the United States would prevail on its clients to separate themselves from their erstwhile Al Qaeda allies.

But that never happened. Instead the U.S.-supported groups not only declared publicly that they would not honor a "partial ceasefire" that excluded areas controlled by Al Qaeda's affiliate, then known as Nusra Front, but joined with Nusra Front and its close ally, Ahrar al Sham, in a major open violation of the ceasefire by seizing strategic terrain south of Aleppo in early April.

As the Kerry-Lavrov negotiations on a ceasefire continued, Kerry's State

Department hinted that the U.S. was linking its willingness to pressure its Syrian military clients to separate themselves from Al Qaeda's forces in the northwest to an unspecified Russian concession on the ceasefire that was still being negotiated.

It is now clear that what Kerry was pushing for was what the Obama administration characterized as the "grounding" of the Syrian air force in the current agreement.

### **Al Qaeda's Ties**

Now that it has gotten that concession from the Russians, the crucial question is what the Obama administration intends to do about the ties between its own military clients and Al Qaeda in Aleppo and elsewhere in the northwest.

Thus far the primary evidence available for answering that question is two letters from U.S. envoy to the Syrian opposition Michael Ratney to opposition groups backed by the United States. The first letter, sent on Sept. 3, after most of the Kerry-Lavrov agreement had already been hammered out, appears to have been aimed primarily at reassuring those Syrian armed groups.

As translated by al-Monitor, it asserted, "Russia will prevent regime planes from flying, and this means there will not be bombing by the regime of areas controlled by the opposition, regardless of who is present in the area, including areas in which Jabhat Fateh al Sham [the new name adopted by Al Qaeda's Nusra Front] has a presence alongside other opposition factions."

Ratney confirmed that the U.S. would in return "offer Russia coordination from our side to weaken al Qaeda." But he also assured U.S. clients that their interests would be protected under the new agreement.

"[W]e believe this ceasefire should be stronger," he wrote, "because it should prevent Russia and the regime from bombing the opposition and civilians under the pretext that its striking Jabhat al Nusra."

The Ratney letter makes no reference to any requirement for the armed opposition to move away from their Al Qaeda allies or even terminate their military relationships, and thus implied that they need not do so.

But in a follow-up letter, undated but apparently sent on Sept. 10, following the completion of the new Kerry-Lavrov agreement, Ratney wrote, "We urge the rebels to distance themselves and cut all ties with Fateh of Sham, formerly Nusra Front, or there will be severe consequences."

The difference between the two messages is obviously dramatic. That suggests

that one of the last concessions made by Kerry in the Sept. 9 meeting with Lavrov may have been that a message would be sent to U.S. military clients with precisely such language.

The totality of the two letters from Ratney underlines the reluctance of the United States to present an ultimatum to its Syrian clients, no matter how clearly they are implicated in Al Qaeda operations against the ceasefire. Last spring, the State Department never publicly commented on the participation by the U.S.-supported armed groups in the Nusra Front offensive in violation of the ceasefire agreement, effectively providing political cover for it.

The decision by U.S.-supported armed groups in March to defy the ceasefire was taken in the knowledge that Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia had agreed to resupply the Nusra Front-led commands in the northwest and had even provided shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles to Nusra's close ally Ahrar al Sham.

### **Turkey's Dubious Role**

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's recent shift in policy toward rapprochement with Russia and his talk of ending the war in Syria are fueled by determination to prevent Syrian Kurds from establishing a unified Kurdistan along the Turkish border.

The Wilson Center's Henry Barkey, a leading specialist on Turkey, told a meeting sponsored by the Middle East Institute last week that Erdogan's Syria policy is "90 percent about the Kurds."

But Erdogan does not appear ready to pull the rug out from under Turkey's client groups in Syria. In fact, Turkey suddenly dialed back its rhetorical shift on Syria in July just when the newly renamed Jabhat Fateh al Sham revealed for the first time that it was about to launch its major offensive for Aleppo.

The domestic political context of U.S. Syrian policy remains strongly hostile to any joint U.S. operations with Russia that could affect U.S.-supported anti-Assad clients, even though it is now generally acknowledged that those forces are "marbled" with troops of Al Qaeda's franchise, especially in Aleppo.

During the spring and summer, Reuters, The Washington Post and other media outlets reported a string of complaints from the Pentagon and the CIA about Obama's plans to reach an agreement with Russia on Syria that would commit the United States to cooperate against Al Qaeda's Syrian franchise. These complaints argued that the Russians could not be trusted and that they intended to target U.S.-supported groups in a proxy war.

The real reasons for these attacks on the negotiations with Russia, however,

were more parochial. The Pentagon is determined to maintain the line that Russia is a dangerous threat and should be firmly opposed everywhere. The CIA's clandestine service has long wanted a more aggressive program of military assistance for its Syrian clients, which would be a major CIA covert operation.

Thus, even though the new agreement calls for U.S. "coordination" with Russia of air strikes against Al Qaeda forces, the Obama administration can be expected to raise objections whenever it sees that a proposed operation would come too close to targets associated with its clients. Otherwise, more leaks from opponents of the agreement in the Pentagon and CIA – or even in the State Department – would surely follow.

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## The Fraudulent Case for a Syrian Escalation

**Exclusive:** Washington's armchair warriors are pounding the drums for a major U.S. military escalation in Syria but a new report shows there's little reason to think that would help, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

The recent call by 51 dissenting State Department officials for U.S. military escalation in Syria is merely one of dozens of similar demands by neoconservatives and anguished liberals who accuse President Obama of moral failure for not dictating peace in Syria at the end of a gun.

At almost the same time as the dissent went public, in fact, the hawkish Center for New American Security issued similar recommendations under the auspices of Michele Flournoy, Hillary Clinton's likely pick for Secretary of Defense. Its report called for more "arming and training" of anti-government rebels, launching of "limited military strikes" against the Assad regime, and eliminating "artificial manpower limitations" on military missions in the country.

Critics warn that such policies would violate international law, in the absence of any United Nations authorization for intervention, and risk a dangerous confrontation with Russia. But the slew of reports, speeches and columns calling

for “limited” and “judicious” military escalation have an even bigger flaw: they never make even the slightest case for thinking such interventions could work.

Their claims reflect magical thinking. Champions of intervention cling to the wishful belief that if the world’s one superpower wants something badly enough, we must be able to attain it. But as our disastrous experiences in Iraq and Libya – not to mention Vietnam – should have made abundantly clear to any sentient being, America simply lacks the capability to find and empower suitable local partners and then dictate political outcomes.

Our experience in Syria itself should have made the same lesson clear. President Obama ordered the Pentagon to spend \$500 million to “train-and-equip” anti-regime “moderates.” The program graduated all of 54 recruits, most of whom were promptly kidnapped by the local Al Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra (possibly at the instigation of Turkey). Similarly, U.S. arms for “moderate” rebels have consistently fallen into the hands of al-Nusra.

### **A Contradictory Report**

But don’t take my word for it. Consider the spectacularly contradictory new report by the “progressive” Century Foundation, called “The Case for a More Robust U.S. Intervention in Syria.” Despite its conventional recommendations, author Thanassis Cambanis offers reason after reason to question how U.S. escalation could possibly make things better.

As Cambanis admits, the Obama administration *has* been “funding, training, and arming parts of the opposition” for several years now. And he acknowledges that “Most of the armed opposition has survived only because of foreign intervention – the exceptions being the most distressing elements: Islamic State and Nusra.”

Unfortunately, he adds, Washington’s favored allies are “disconnected from the most important groups doing the fighting and delivering services in rebel-controlled territory.”

Some Kurdish groups – bitterly opposed by Turkey – have shown great prowess in the field. But America’s favored local force, the Free Syrian Army, is a mish-mash of “citizens’ militias, local mafia and gangster groupings, and semi-professional forces” whose promise “never materialized,” Cambanis writes. “Free Syrian Army brigades remain as bitterly fragmented today as they were in 2011–12 – perhaps even more so. No amount of cajoling by the United States . . . has persuaded even the most minute brigades to submit to an umbrella command.”

Worse yet, “Many Free Syrian Army groups have been guilty of corruption, brutality, torture, and other crimes,” Cambanis writes.

Moderates, it seems, make bad fighters. In contrast, Cambanis says our allies like Saudi Arabia and Turkey have funded “other more Islamist fighting forces, including the Army of Islam around Damascus and Ahrar al-Sham, a group with both jihadist and nationalist pedigrees that is probably the single most powerful militant rebel force in northern Syria, outside of Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and the Islamic State group. Few of these groups . . . can be described as ‘moderate.’ . . . The only unitary actors with discernible chains of command are the Islamist-jihadist hardline groups: Islamic State, Nusra, and Ahrar el Sham.”

### **Dominant Islamists**

In fact, Islamists are so dominant, Cambanis acknowledges, that “In most of rebel-held northern Syria, the Free Syrian Army groups exist largely at the pleasure of Ahrar or Nusra, and in some areas face the specter of destruction by Islamic State.”

Bottom line, he admits, “There is no sizable ‘moderate,’ nationalist, or secular faction that could lead a military offensive, much less claim to represent the opposition in a negotiating setting. Any anti-Assad intervention will, in the short-term, benefit the most powerful factions on the ground – the extremists and the jihadists.”

The typical proponent of more U.S. military intervention is as oblivious to the realities of the regime as to those of its opposition. Unlike them, Cambanis concedes that Assad does not simply rule through terror.

Assad’s government “possesses significant wells of legitimacy,” Cambanis writes, “his rule has maintained some degree of buy-in from millions of Sunni Arabs, as well as thousands of Kurds. . . .

“Conversations suggest there are plenty more, perhaps numbering in the millions, who do not like the way Assad runs Syria but prefer his secular, pluralistic dictatorship to the alternative they believe the rebellion offers: violence, anarchy, or a Sunni theocracy. . . . The alternative, in their view, is the kind of unchecked sectarianism they have heard about in areas controlled by Islamic State, Nusra, Ahrar, . . . even supposedly moderate Free Syrian Army-branded groups.”

So here you have it: Millions of Syrian support Assad, or prefer him to the alternative. His armed opponents are mainly radical Islamists, varying only in their willingness to make tactical compromises. All previous U.S. efforts to rally an effective force of “moderates” have failed utterly.

So what exactly makes interventionists think that doubling down on a failed strategy will produce a different and better outcome? In light of these

failures, how dare they claim the moral high ground? What gives them the right even to be taken seriously as foreign policy experts? It's time to call most of these armchair warriors what they are: frauds.

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## 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).**

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## Obama’s ‘Moderate’ Syrian Deception

**Exclusive:** President Obama, who once called the idea of “moderate” Syrian rebels a “fantasy,” has maintained the fiction to conceal the fact that many “moderates” are fighting alongside Al Qaeda’s jihadists, an inconvenient truth that is complicating an end to Syria’s civil war, explains Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

Secretary of State John Kerry insisted at the Munich Security Conference on Saturday that the agreement with Russia on a temporary halt in the war in Syria can only be carried out if Russia stops its airstrikes against what Kerry is now calling “legitimate opposition groups.”

But what Kerry did not say is that the ceasefire agreement would not apply to operations against Al Qaeda’s Syrian franchise, the Nusra Front, which both the United States and Russia have recognized as a terrorist organization. That fact is crucial to understand why the Obama administration’s reference to “legitimate opposition groups” is a deception intended to mislead public opinion.

The Russian airstrikes in question are aimed at cutting off Aleppo city, which is now the primary center of Nusra's power in Syria, from the Turkish border. To succeed in that aim, Russian, Syrian and Iranian forces are attacking rebel troops deployed in towns all along the routes from Aleppo to the border. Those rebels include units belonging to Nusra, their close ally Ahrar al-Sham, and other armed opposition groups some of whom have gotten weapons from the CIA in the past.

Kerry's language suggests that those other "legitimate opposition groups" are not part of Nusra's military structure but are separate from it both organizationally and physically. But in fact, there is no such separation in either of the crucial provinces of Idlib and Aleppo.

Information from a wide range of sources, including some of those the United States has been explicitly supporting, makes it clear that every armed anti-Assad organization unit in those provinces is engaged in a military structure controlled by Nusra militants. All of these rebel groups fight alongside the Nusra Front and coordinate their military activities with it.

This reality even slips into mainstream U.S. news accounts on occasion, such as Anne Barnard's New York Times article last Saturday about the proposed Syrian cease-fire in which she reported, "With the proviso that the Nusra Front, Al Qaeda's branch in Syria, can still be bombed, Russia puts the United States in a difficult position; the insurgent groups it supports cooperate in some places with the well-armed, well-financed Nusra in what they say is a tactical alliance of necessity against government forces."

At least since 2014 the Obama administration has armed a number of Syrian rebel groups even though it knew the groups were coordinating closely with the Nusra Front, which was simultaneously getting arms from Turkey and Qatar. The strategy called for supplying TOW anti-tank missiles to the "Syrian Revolutionaries Front" (SRF) as the core of a client Syrian army that would be independent of the Nusra Front.

However, when a combined force of Nusra and non-jihadist brigades including the SRF captured the Syrian army base at Wadi al-Deif in December 2014, the truth began to emerge. The SRF and other groups to which the United States had supplied TOW missiles had fought under Nusra's command to capture the base.

And as one of the SRF fighters who participated in the operation, Abu Kumayt, recalled to The New York Times, after the victory only Nusra and its very close ally Ahrar al-Sham were allowed to enter the base. Nusra had allowed the groups

supported by the United States to maintain the appearance of independence from Nusra, according to Abu Kumyt, in order to induce the United States to continue the supply of U.S. weapons.

### **Playing Washington**

In other words, Nusra was playing Washington, exploiting the Obama administration's desire to have its own Syrian Army as an instrument for influencing the course of the war. The administration was evidently a willing dupe.

Former U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford, who had been supporting an aggressive program of arming opposition brigades that had been approved by the CIA, told a January 2015 seminar in Washington, "For a long time we have looked the other way while the Nusra Front and armed groups on the ground, some of which are getting help from us, have coordinated in military operations against the regime."

Reflecting the views of some well-placed administration officials, he added, "I think the days of us looking the other way are finished." But instead of breaking with the deception that the CIA's hand-picked clients were independent of Nusra, the Obama administration continued to cling to it.

Nusra and its allies were poised to strike the biggest blow against the Assad regime up to the time the capture of Idlib province. Although some U.S.-supported groups participated in the campaign in March and April 2015, the "operations room" planning the campaign was run by Al Qaeda and its close ally Ahrar al Sham.

And before the campaign was launched, Nusra had forced another U.S.-supported group, Harakat Hazm, to disband and took all of its TOW anti-tank missiles.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia and Qatar were financing the "Army of Conquest," commanded by Nusra, and were lobbying the administration to support it. U.S. strategy on Syria was then shifting toward a tacit reliance on the jihadists to achieve the U.S. objective of putting sufficient pressure on the Assad regime to force some concessions on Damascus.

But the idea that an independent "moderate" armed opposition still existed and that the United States was basing its policy on those "moderates" was necessary to provide a political fig leaf for the covert and indirect U.S. reliance on Al Qaeda's Syrian franchise's military success.

When the fall of Idlib led to the Russian intervention last September, the U.S. immediately resorted to its propaganda line about Russian targeting of the

“moderate” armed opposition. It had become a necessary shield for the United States to continue playing a political-diplomatic game in Syria.

As the current Russian-Syrian-Iranian offensive between Aleppo and the Turkish border unfolds, the Obama administration’s stance has been contradicted by fresh evidence of the subordination of non-jihadist forces to the Nusra Front. In late January, Nusra consolidated its role as the primary opposition military force in the eastern part of Aleppo City by sending a huge convoy of 200 vehicles loaded with fighters, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights in London.

BBC reported that “thousands of troops” had just arrived in Aleppo for the coming battle. Ahrar al-Sham confirmed on Feb. 2 that its ally, the Nusra Front, had deployed a large convoy of “reinforcements” to Aleppo. The pro-Assad Beirut daily As-Safir reported that the convoys also included artillery, tanks and armored vehicles, and that Nusra had taken over a number of buildings to serve as its headquarters and offices.

### **How Al Qaeda Controls**

An assessment published on Saturday by the Institute for the Study of War, which has long advocated more U.S. military assistance to Syrian anti-Assad groups, provides further insights into the Nusra Front’s system of control over U.S.-supported groups. One way the jihadist organization maintains that control, according to the study, is Ahrar al Sham’s control of the Bab al Hawa border crossing with Turkey, which gives Nusra and Ahrar power over the distribution of supplies from Turkey into Aleppo City and surrounding areas.

ISW points out that another instrument of control is the use of “military operations rooms” in which Nusra and Ahrar al Sham play the dominant role while allocating resources and military roles to lesser military units.

Although the Nusra Front is not listed as part of the “Army of Aleppo” formally announced to combat the Russian offensive, it is hardly credible that it does not hold the primary positions in the operations room for the Aleppo campaign, given the large infusion of Nusra troops into the theater from Idlib and its history in other such operations rooms in the Idlib and Aleppo regions.

Yet another facet of Nusra’s power in Aleppo is its control over the main water and power plants in the opposition-controlled districts of the city. But the ultimate source of Nusra’s power over U.S.-supported groups is the threat to attack them as agents of the United States and take over their assets. Al Qaeda’s franchise “successfully destroyed two U.S.-backed groups in Northern Syria in 2014 and early 2015,” ISW recalls, and initiated a campaign last October against one of the remaining U.S.-supported groups, Nour al Din al

Zenki.

The official U.S. posture on the current offensive in the Aleppo theater and the proposed ceasefire obscures the fact that a successful Russian-Syrian operation would make it impossible for the external states, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, to resupply the Nusra Front and Ahrar al Sham and thus end the military threat to the Syrian government as well as the possibility of Al Qaeda's seizure of power in Damascus.

Russian-Syrian success offers the most realistic prospect for an end to the bloodletting in Syria and would also reduce the likelihood of an eventual Al Qaeda seizure of power in Syria.

The Obama administration certainly understands that fact and has already privately adjusted its diplomatic strategy to take into account the likelihood that the Nusra Front will now be substantially weakened. But it cannot acknowledge any of that publicly because such a recognition would infuriate many hardliners in Washington who still demand "regime change" in Damascus whatever the risks.

President Obama is under pressure from these domestic critics as well as from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other GCC allies to oppose any gains by the Russians and the Assad regime as a loss for the United States. And Obama administration must continue to hide the reality that it was complicit in a strategy of arming Nusra in part through the mechanism of arming Washington's "moderate" clients to achieve leverage on the Syrian regime.

Thus the game of diplomacy and deceptions continues.

**Gareth Porter is an independent investigative journalist and winner of the 2012 Gellhorn Prize for journalism. He is the author of the newly published *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*.**

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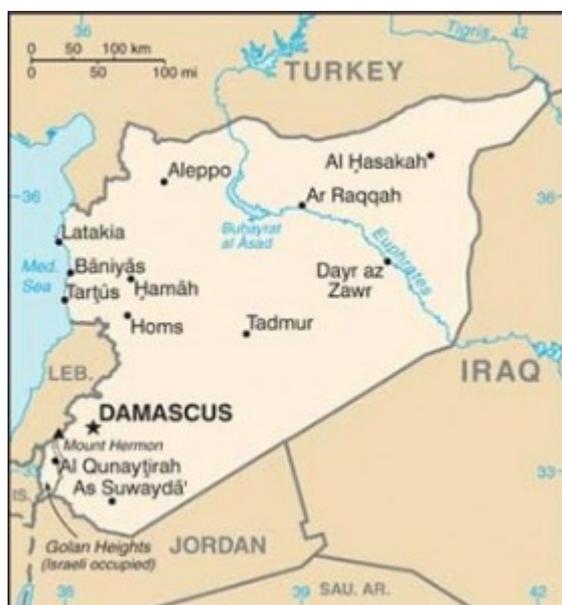
## The Real Obstacle to Syrian Peace

Despite Russia and the U.S. coming together on Friday to back a U.N.-approved peace plan for Syria, major obstacles remain, including the on-the-ground reality that U.S. "allies," such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, have armed and financed powerful jihadist forces that won't compromise, as Gareth Porter explains.

By Gareth Porter

The anti-Assad coalition led by the United States continues to stagger toward the supposed objective of beginning peace negotiations between the Syrian government and what has now been blessed as the politically acceptable “opposition.” The first such meeting was scheduled for Jan. 1, but no one on either side believes for a moment that any such negotiations are going to happen any time in the foreseeable future.

The notion that negotiations on a ceasefire and political settlement will take place lacks credibility, because the political-military realities on the ground in Syria won’t allow it. Those opposition groups that are prepared to contemplate some kind of settlement with the Assad regime do not have the capacity to make such an agreement a reality. And those organizations that have the capacity to end the war against the Damascus regime have no interest in agreeing to anything short of forcible regime change.



On top of those serious contradictions, Russia is openly contesting the U.S. plan for a negotiated settlement. The United States is pushing the line that President Bashar al-Assad must step down, but Russia is insisting that such a demand is illegitimate.

The contradiction between the pretensions of the U.S.-sponsored plan and Syrian political-military realities was very much in evidence at the Riyadh conference earlier this month. The conference, which was supported by the United States and the other “Friends of Syria,” including Britain, France, Turkey, Qatar and the UAE, was in theory to bring together the broadest possible range of opposition groups excluding only “terrorist” groups. Belying that claim, however, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (YPJ) being armed by the United States in Syria was excluded from the conference at the insistence of Turkey.

A key objective of the conference was apparently to bring Ahrar al-Sham, the most powerful opposition military force apart from the Islamic State, into the putative game of ceasefire negotiations. But inviting the organization was bound to backfire sooner or later. Ahrar al-Sham has been closely allied with al-Qaeda's Syrian franchise, al-Nusra Front, both politically and militarily. Moreover, it has explicitly denounced the idea of any compromise with the regime in Damascus.

Ahrar al-Sham showed up at the conference, but refused to follow the script. The representative of Ahrar al-Sham called for "the overthrow of the Assad regime with all its pillars and symbols, and handing them over for a fair trial." That is not exactly the game plan envisioned in the negotiating process, which assumes that Assad must leave after a transitional period, but that the government security institutions would remain in place.

On the second day of the conference, Ahrar al-Sham's representative announced that the group was leaving, complaining that the conference organizers had refused to endorse its insistence on the "Muslim" identity of the opposition.

The Ahrar al-Sham refusal to play ball was the most dramatic indication of that the entire exercise is caught in a fundamental contradiction. But it wasn't the only case of a major armed organization whose attendance at the Riyadh meeting raised the obvious issue of conflicting interests. Jaysh al-Islam is a coalition of 60 Salafist armed groups in the Damascus suburbs whose orientation appears to be indistinguishable from that of Ahrar al-Sham.

The coalition is led by Salafist extremist Zahran Alloush, and has fought alongside Ahrar al-Sham as well as al-Nusra Front. Last April, Alloush travelled to Istanbul, where he met with the leader of Ahrar al-Sham. Like their close allies, moreover, Alloush and his coalition reject the idea of a political settlement with a secular Syrian state authority, with or without Assad.

If it is so obvious that the Riyadh conference and the larger scheme for peace negotiations are not going to come to fruition, why has the Obama administration been pushing it? The explanation for what appears to be a lost cause can be inferred from the basic facts surrounding the administration's Syria policy.

First, the administration adopted the objective of regime change in Syria in late 2011, at a time when it was convinced that the regime was on the ropes. And although it has partially backtracked from that aim by distinguishing between Assad and the institutional structure of the regime, it cannot back off the demand for Assad to step down without a humiliating admission of failure and major domestic political damage.

Second in its pursuit of that regime change policy the administration allowed its Sunni regional allies especially Turkey and Saudi Arabia to do things that it wasn't prepared to do. Obama tolerated Turkish facilitation of foreign fighters and Turkish, Qatari and Saudi funneling of arms to their favorite Islamist groups. The result was that Islamic State, al-Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam emerged in 2013 and 2014 as the main challengers to the Assad regime.

But the White House has officially maintained its distance from al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham, while continuing to collaborate closely with Sunni allies, as they have provided financial support to the "Army of Conquest" command dominated by al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham to help the forces under their leadership gain control of Idlib province and pose the most serious threat to the Assad regime thus far.

And the third fact about the policy is that the Obama administration embarked on its campaign of illusory peace negotiations with little more than one year left before Obama leaves the Oval Office.

The obvious implication of these facts is that the ostensible push for a ceasefire and peace negotiations is a useful device for managing the political optics associated with Syria during the administration's final year. If it is not questioned by media and political elites, the administration will be able to claim both that it is insisting on getting rid of Assad and at the same time moving toward a ceasefire and political settlement.

Never mind that claim has nothing to do with reality. Being the dominant power, after all, means never having to say you're sorry, because you don't have to acknowledge your responsibility for the terrible war and chaos visited on a country because of your policy.

**Gareth Porter is an independent investigative journalist and winner of the 2012 Gellhorn Prize for journalism. He is the author of the newly published *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*. [This story originally appeared at Middle East Eye at <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/why-us-pushes-illusory-syrian-peace-process-1049583574#sthash.0N510IKv.dpuf>]**

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## Blocking Democracy as Syria's Solution

**Exclusive:** The long-cherished neocon dream of "regime change" in Syria is

blocking a possible route out of the crisis a ceasefire followed by elections in which President Assad could compete. The problem is there's no guarantee that Assad would lose and thus the dream might go unfulfilled, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The solution to the crisis in Syria could be democracy letting the people of Syria decide who they want as their leaders but it is the Obama administration and its regional Sunni "allies," including U.S.-armed militants and jihadists, that don't want to risk a democratic solution because it might not achieve the long-held goal of "regime change."

Some Syrian opposition forces, which were brought together under the auspices of the Saudi monarchy in Riyadh this past week, didn't even want the word "democracy" included in their joint statement. The New York Times reported on Friday, "Islamist delegates objected to using the word 'democracy' in the final statement, so the term 'democratic mechanism' was used instead, according to a member of one such group who attended the meeting."

Even that was too much for Ahrar al-Sham, one of the principal jihadist groups fighting side-by-side with Al Qaeda's Nusra Front, the two key elements inside the Saudi-created Army of Conquest, which uses sophisticated U.S.-supplied TOW missiles to kill Syrian government troops.

Ahrar al-Sham announced its withdrawal from the Riyadh conference because the meeting didn't "confirm the Muslim identity of our people." Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has sought to maintain a secular government that protects the rights of Christians, Alawites, Shiites and other religious minorities, but Sunni militants have been fighting to overthrow him since 2011.

Despite Ahrar al-Sham's rejection of the Saudi-organized conference, all the opposition participants, including one from Ahrar al-Sham who apparently wasn't aware of his group's announcement, signed the agreement, the Times reported.

"All parties signed a final statement that called for maintaining the unity of Syria and building a civil, representative government that would take charge after a transitional period, at the start of which Mr. Assad and his associates would step down," wrote Times' correspondent Ben Hubbard.

But the prospects of Assad and his government just agreeing to cede power to the opposition remains highly unlikely. An obvious alternative favored by Assad and Russian President Vladimir Putin is to achieve a ceasefire and then have internationally supervised elections in which the Syrian people could choose their own leaders.

Although President Barack Obama insists Assad is hated by most Syrians and if that's true, he would presumably lose any fair election the U.S. position is to bar Assad from the ballot, thus ensuring "regime change" in Syria, a long-held goal of Official Washington's neoconservatives.

In other words, to fulfill the neocons' dream of Syrian "regime change," the Obama administration is continuing the bloody Syrian conflict which has killed a quarter million people, has created an opening for Islamic State and Al Qaeda terrorists, and has driven millions of refugees into and through nearby countries, now destabilizing Europe and feeding xenophobia in the United States.

For his part, Assad called participants in the Saudi conference "terrorists" and rejected the idea of negotiating with them. "They want the Syrian government to negotiate with the terrorists, something I don't think anyone would accept in any country," Assad told Spanish journalists, as he repeated his position that many of the terrorists were backed by foreign governments and that he would only "deal with the real, patriotic national opposition."

### **Kinks in the Process**

Secretary of State John Kerry told reporters on Friday that he was in contact with senior Saudi officials and noted, "there are some questions and obviously a couple of in our judgment kinks to be worked out" though expressing confidence that the problems could be resolved.

A key problem appears to be that the Obama administration has so demonized Assad and so bought into the neocon goal of "regime change" that Obama doesn't feel that he can back down on his "Assad must go!" mantra. Yet, to force Assad out and bar him from running in an election means escalating the war by either further arming the Sunni jihadists or mounting a larger-scale invasion of Syria with the U.S. military confronting Syrian and now Russian forces to establish what is euphemistically called "a safe zone" inside Syria. A related "no-fly zone" would require destroying Syrian air defenses, now supplied by the Russians.

Obama has largely followed the first course of action, allowing Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and other Sunni "allies" to funnel U.S. weapons to jihadists, including Ahrar al-Sham which fights alongside Al Qaeda's Nusra Front as the two seek to transform Syria into a Islamic fundamentalist state, a goal shared by Al Qaeda's spinoff (and now rival), the Islamic State.

Retired U.S. Army Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, the former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, has termed Obama's choice of aiding the jihadists a "willful decision," even in the face of DIA warnings about the likely rise of

the Islamic State and other extremists.

In August 2012, DIA described the danger in a classified report, which noted that “The salafist, the Muslim Brotherhood, and AQI [Al Qaeda in Iraq, later ISI or ISIS and then the Islamic State] are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria.” The report also said that “If the situation unravels there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared salafist principality in eastern Syria” and that “ISI could also declare an Islamic State through its union with other terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria.”

Despite these risks, Obama continued to insist that “Assad must go!” and let his administration whip up a propaganda campaign around claims that Assad’s forces launched a sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013. Though many of the U.S. claims about that attack have since been discredited and later evidence implicated radical jihadists (possibly collaborating with Turkish intelligence) trying to trick the U.S. military into intervening on their side the Obama administration did not retract or clarify its initial claims.

By demonizing Assad much like the demonization of Russian President Putin Obama may feel that he is deploying “soft power” propaganda to put foreign adversaries on the defensive while also solidifying his political support inside hawkish U.S. opinion circles, but false narratives can take on a life of their own and make rational settlements difficult if not impossible.

Now, even though the Syrian crisis has become a tsunami threatening to engulf Europe with a refugee crisis and the United States with anti-Muslim hysteria, Obama can’t accept the most obvious solution: compel all reasonable sides to accept a ceasefire and hold an internationally supervised election in which anyone who wants to lead the country can stand before the voters.

If Obama is right about the widespread hatred of Assad, then there should be nothing to worry about. The Syrian people will dictate “regime change” through the ballot box.

Democracy supposedly one of the U.S. government’s goals for Middle East countries can be the answer to the problem. However, since democracy can be an unpredictable process, it might not guarantee “regime change” which apparently makes democracy an unsuitable solution for Syria.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com).**

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