



America's Plan B for Syria: Give Al-Qaeda More Powerful Weapons

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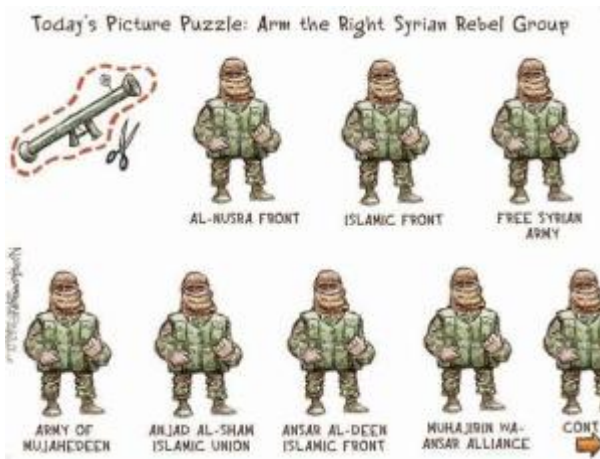
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According to the Wall Street Journal [1], Washington has a Plan B for Syria. If the UN-mediated Geneva talks between the Syrian government and foreign-backed opposition fail to bring about the resignation of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad (i.e., the regime change in Syria the United States wants) Washington will “up the ante” by equipping al-Qaeda-linked Islamist rebels with more powerful weapons than the CIA, and Washington’s regional allies, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, have already given them.

The new weapons would place in the hands of so-called moderate rebels—Islamists who cooperate with, fight alongside of, are enmeshed with, share equipment with, and operate under license to, al-Qaeda’s franchise in Syria, the Nusra Front—the means to attack Syrian aircraft and artillery. In effect, “upping the ante” would amount to funnelling more powerful weapons to al-Qaeda—an organization Washington claims to be fighting a war on terror against—using the misleadingly labelled “moderate” rebels as an arms conduit.

There are no “moderate” rebels in Syria. “Moderate” is a term of deception used by Washington to sanitize its collusion with al-Qaeda and other Islamists and to foster the appearance of US intervention on the side of the angels. Because Washington can’t give weapons directly to al-Qaeda’s Syrian franchise—a group it officially designated as a terrorist organization after it unleashed a string of suicide bombings in Syria, including against civilians [2]—it delivers arms indirectly through allied Islamists groups it dishonestly calls, “moderates” with the mainstream media actively participating in the deception by aping Washington’s use of the term.

As early as 2012, the US Defense Intelligence Agency concluded that the armed opposition in Syria was dominated by ultra-conservative Sunni jihadists, along with the Muslim Brotherhood (which has had a long history of violent insurrection in Syria to overthrow what it sees as the “infidel” and “apostate” non-sectarian secular government in Damascus, and AQI (al-Qaeda in Iraq, forerunner of Nusra Front and Islamic State.) [3] Even the Free Syrian Army, touted in the early days of the war by Western media as a secular, moderate group sharply differentiated from the jihadists, in reality hardly lived up to the carefully crafted image bestowed upon it by Western PR specialists to garner the support of Western public opinion. In December 2012, the New York Times’ Michael R. Gordon and Anne Barnard reported that not only did the Free Syrian Army coordinate with al-Qaeda fighters in Syria, it included groups with similar ideologies—that is, with ideologies similar to that of Osama bin Laden. [4] When in 2012 the United States officially designated al-Nusra a terrorist organization, “moderate” fighters launched a protest under the banner “We are all Jabhat al-Nusra.” [5]



Moderates, in the form of secular armed forces, or comprising fighters whose aim is not a constitution based on a conservative Sunni interpretation of the Qur'an, but on democratic principles, are virtually absent, a "fantasy" as US president Barack Obama has called them. [6] With no ready-made secular democratic force on which to build an armed opposition to the Syrian government that would be acceptable to Western populations, the United States tried to manufacture one, not once, not twice, but three times, according to Joshua Landis, a specialist on Syria. Each attempt ended in spectacular failure. [7] The Pentagon abandoned a \$500 million program to recruit and train 3,000 "moderate" rebels after managing to graduate only 54 fighters. [8] Obama would tell New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman that the idea that there was ever a moderate opposition that was going to overthrow Assad and fight Islamic state "if we just sent a few arms is a fantasy." [9]

According to US Director of Intelligence, James Clapper, "moderate these days is increasingly becoming anyone who's not affiliated with ISIL." [10] Hence, inasmuch as the armed opposition is largely, if not wholly, comprised of ultra-conservative Sunni Muslims, and has been since at least 2012—one rebel leader said the Western concept of secularist Syrian rebel is misguided [11]—"moderate" means a jihadist—just not one who holds an Islamic State membership card. This would include the Nusra Front. Indeed, attempts have been made to label al-Qaeda's Syrian franchise a "moderate" fighting group through rebranding, replacing its name with the Army of Conquest (also Victory Army and Jaish al-Fatah) and then declaring the newly named group "moderate." (Al-Nusra, or Nusra Front, in fact, is also a rebranding of al-Qaeda.)

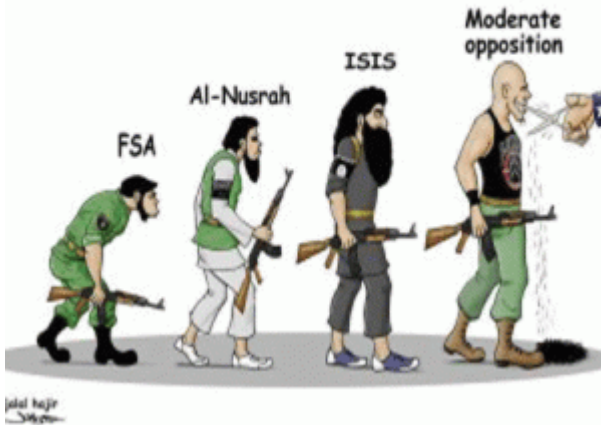
That the Army of Conquest is simply a new cloak for al-Qaeda is a reality that's not difficult to uncover. Supported by US allies Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, the Army of Conquest "is led by al-Nusra Front...and by the ideologically similar Ahrar al Sham," according to veteran Middle East correspondent Patrick Cockburn [12]; is built "around al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, well armed and supported by the region's Sunni states," according to Syria specialists Joshua Landis and Steven Simon, writing in the unofficial magazine of the US State Department, Foreign Affairs [13]; "is an alliance of insurgent groups that includes the al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, and the hard-line Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham," according to the Voice of America, the US government's official propaganda arm [14]; and is a "rebel alliance in which Nusra plays an indispensable role," according to the Wall Street Journal's Yaroslav Trofimov [15].



It's also clear that al-Qaeda's idea of moderation leaves much to be desired. As part of its attempt to rebrand itself as moderate, the jihadist group has said that it would not automatically massacre people it sees as infidels, such as Syria's Alawites, Druze and Christians, but would exercise moderation by allowing them to convert to ultra-conservative Saudi Wahhabi-inspired Islam. [16]

The other significant player in the Army of Conquest, Ahrar- al-Sham, is an al-Qaeda clone, according to Cockburn, which would make it a clone of al-Nusra itself. [17] The Wall Street Journal's Nour Malas reports that the organization espouses "an ultraconservative Salafist brand of Islam and feature(s) political agendas and anti-Shiite sectarian rhetoric" and fights "alongside Nusra Front." [18] In other words, Ahrar al-Sham is al-Nusra in all but name. Still, US secretary of state John Kerry calls the al-Qaeda clone "moderate" because it's not ISIS or al-Nusra, extending Clapper's definition of what a moderate is to any Sunni jihadist group that has yet to be designated a terrorist organization, regardless of whether it uses terrorist methods or not, or has the same goals as those that do. "I don't want to categorize people except hard core like the Nusra Front and the Islamic State," Kerry said, [19] revealing that the label "moderate" is meaningless and strictly serves a political function of concealing the true nature of the groups Washington has allied itself with in Syria. Ahrar al-Sham's veridical nature as a violent Islamist organization of the al-Qaeda mold hasn't stopped Kerry from giving it his seal of approval or European diplomats from meeting with its political officers. [20]

Not only are the "moderates" ideologically similar to al-Qaeda, if not direct clones, they are part of the al-Qaeda nexus in all but name. As early as 2012, the paragon moderate rebel group, the Western-backed Free Syrian Army, was reported by the New York Times' Tim Arango and Anne Barnard to have been working closely with al-Nusra. Not only that, FSA members expressed admiration for the al-Qaeda franchise. [21] Echoing the Times, the Wall Street Journal reported that the Western-backed rebel group cooperated with al-Qaeda in Syria. [22] Indeed, the conclusion drawn by Cockburn that "there is no dividing wall between" ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra "and America's supposedly moderate opposition allies" [23] is underscored almost daily in the leading US newspapers.



- “Many of the anti-Assad groups aligned with the United States fight alongside the Nusra Front.” New York Times, February 23, 2016 [24].
- “Nusra Front...fights alongside both Western-backed and Islamist rebels.” Wall Street Journal, February 22, 2016 [25].
- Nusra Front “forces are intermingled with moderate rebel groups.” Washington Post, February 19, 2016 [26].
- “The rebel groups that the West considers relatively moderate are ... intertwined in places with the Nusra Front.” New York Times, February 12, 2016 [27].
- “Al-Nusra has fought alongside rebel units which the U.S. and its regional allies have backed.” Wall Street Journal, November 20, 2015 [28].
- “CIA-backed Free Syrian army factions and extremist elements such as Nusra Front and Ahrar al Sham...have been collaborating.” Wall Street Journal, October 9, 2015 [29]
- “...insurgents who have been trained covertly by the Central Intelligence Agency...are enmeshed with or fighting alongside more hard-line Islamist groups, including the Nusra Front, Al Qaeda’s Syria affiliate.” New York Times, July 27, 2015 [30]
- “Some of the same groups being backed by Washington are liaising and cooperating with the Nusra Front.” Wall Street Journal, July 3, 2014 [31]

Aligned with, fighting alongside of, liaising with, intermingled with, intertwined with, collaborating with, enmeshed with, cooperating with: In how many ways is it possible to say that the “moderate” rebels backed by the United States and its allies are part of an alliance dominated by al-Qaeda and its offshoot Islamic State—that they are nothing more than al-Qaeda’s foot soldiers?

“U.S. officials said the CIA has trained and equipped nearly 10,000 fighters sent into Syria over the past several years.” [32] In view of the reality that the moderates are simply mislabelled Islamists who are a part of an al-Qaeda-led alliance and that they “fight under license” to al-Nusra and Islamic State, as Cockburn reports, [33] who has the CIA been training and equipping over the past several years? The answer is clear: al-Qaeda-led jihadists. As Assad observes, “If Obama said the moderate opposition is fantasy, so who do you send the money and armaments to? Reality. You don’t send to the fantasy, you send it to the reality, and the reality are the extremists.” [34]

Hence, the idea that there exist in Syria secular moderates who follow the traditions of the Enlightenment is a con, designed to appeal to Western publics who are more likely to back efforts to aid secular democrats than al-Qaeda-led jihadists. British prime minister David

Cameron claimed improbably—to hoots of well deserved derision—that there are 70,000 moderate fighters in Syria, which is indeed true if, like Humpty Dumpty, Cameron uses words to mean whatever he chooses them to mean. He probably meant, moderate fighters are whoever the West and its allies train and equip, regardless of the groups' ideologies and methods.

Politicians and corporations are no strangers to this sort of definitional legerdemain. The Obama administration insists there are no more than 3,870 US troops in Iraq. Others say there are as many as 5,000. Who's right? It depends of what definition of "in Iraq" you accept—the commonsense one, or Obama's. If the number of US troops in Iraq at this moment is simply tallied, then, there are in the vicinity of 5,000 US military personnel in the country. On the other hand, if you mean what Obama, following Humpty Dumpty, means, then, there are indeed 3,870 US troops in Iraq. The key here is to understand that the US president defines "troops in Iraq" as US military personnel in the country minus those rotated in on a temporary basis. [35] The same principle would apply were it claimed that there are no US troops in Iraq, by defining US military personnel as all active US soldiers operating between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers who are over the age of 65. In other words, one can define "troops in Iraq" in whichever way one wants—and Obama does. The same definitional stratagem is used to deceive Western publics into believing that their governments back secular fighters in Iraq who thirst for democracy, by defining the word "moderate," which everyone believes to mean one thing, and which connotes something desirable, to mean something entirely different, without disclosing the fact that the word is being used in a singular way.

Veteran Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk had challenged Cameron's claim that there are tens of thousands of moderate fighters in Syria, putting the number at closer to 70, on par with the complement of about four dozen moderates the Pentagon was able to recruit despite a \$500 million budget that would have been the envy of Croesus. [36]

The US plan, then, to up the ante if the Geneva talks fail to produce a political transition in Syria (i.e., Washington's desired goal of regime change) by equipping al-Qaeda-led "moderate" rebels with more powerful weapons is a scheme to strengthen al-Qaeda's Syrian franchise militarily. If it is not already clear that rebel groups will pass on US-supplied arms to the al-Qaeda franchise they are enmeshed with, cooperate with, fight alongside of, liaise with, and are ideological similar to, if not clones of, consider this: The rebel group Division 13, which received aid from the United States [37], "had a tacit collaboration with Nusra and even shared with the group some of its ammunition supplies," according to the Wall Street Journal. [38]



Still, concern that Western-backed rebels may act as an arms conduit to al-Qaeda if Washington carries through on its Plan B ought to go further. Shouldn't we object just as strenuously to the arming of the so-called "moderates" themselves, since they are virtual replicas of al-Qaeda? They are ideologically similar to, if

not clones, of the Sunni Islamist organization, and like al-Nusra, practice sectarian violence and are animated by an intolerant, ultra-conservative Saudi Wahhabi-inspired Islam which they aspire to make the constitutional foundation of a Syrian state. As if to underscore the similarities, in 2012, the West's "moderate" jihadist darlings declared that "We are all Jabhat al-Nusra." Arming the "moderates," then, is equal in effect and principle to arming al-Qaeda. Washington and its allies, including the reactionary Gulf monarchies, have already accoutred al-Qaeda-led jihadists with weapons in Syria, and are now threatening to up the ante by giving their Islamist proxies even more deadly arms if they don't get their way at the Geneva talks, visiting even more misery, bloodshed and terror than they have already done on Syria.

Washington cares not one iota for the welfare of the residents of this hapless country, long savaged by Western imperialism. On the contrary, it is willing to spill rivers of Syrian blood and foment sectarian terror, through its al-Qaeda-led proxies, in order to overthrow a government that insists on charting its own course to meet its people's needs in their own way. This is the outcome of the United States' imperialist project to secure a self-assigned "leadership" position in the Middle East, which is to say, to deny the region's people the right to determine their own lives and future. Fortunately for humanity, but unfortunately for the US elite, on whose behalf the US imperial project pivots, the targets of imperialist eruptions have often felt it better to fight than to submit, Syrians no less so than the long string of heroes in the service of human progress who have resisted programs of exploitation by fighting back.

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