

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://www.alternet.org/print/grayzone-project/tahrir-al-sham-al-qaeda-syria-hama-damascus-media>

Al Qaeda Is Attacking Major Syrian Cities with US Weapons — but You Wouldn't Know That from the Media

By Ben Norton
March 22, 2017

In the West, rare al-Qaeda-linked attacks are seized on to justify draconian anti-Muslim policies and growing racism and xenophobia. In Syria, however, the fact that frequent similar attacks are even al-Qaeda-linked at all is played down.

An Islamist extremist went on a rampage in London on March 22, killing at least five people and wounding dozens more. At the same moment, there were also al-Qaeda-linked attacks going on against major Syrian cities — with drastically different media responses.

In fact, the same Western media outlets that made sure every person on the planet knew about the attack in London simultaneously grossly understated, and even outright ignored, the ties of the Syrian jihadists to the extremist group that carried out the 9/11 attacks.

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, a military alliance that represents an attempt to rebrand Syria's original al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat Al-Nusra, initiated an assault near the city of Hama on March 21, in collaboration with fighters from the so-called Free Syrian Army, or FSA, which has for years been supported by the U.S. and its allies.

In the days before, the same al-Qaeda-linked group and another extremist Islamist militia, Ahrar al-Sham, launched two other attacks inside and on the outskirts of Syria's capital, Damascus, targeting civilian areas under the control of the Syrian government.

In her coverage of the assault on Damascus, the Washington Post's Liz Sly provided a prime example of how this media whitewashing works: Sly did not even mention [3] Tahrir al-Sham's links to al-Qaeda, referring to the group simple as "extreme." She also described a U.S.-vetted FSA faction that was fighting alongside rebranded al-Qaeda, Faylaq al-Rahman, as "moderate."

Another disturbing development that has been virtually ignored by U.S. mainstream media are the videos [4] of Tahrir al-Sham and the FSA-affiliated Jaish al-Izza [5], which is fighting alongside rebranded al-Qaeda in the Hama offensive, attacking the Syrian army with TOW anti-tank missiles, which were manufactured by the American weapons company Raytheon and supplied to CIA-vetted rebels.

Echoing Western governments' extensive support for armed rebels committed to overthrowing the Syrian government, Western media outlets have for years consistently downplayed the influence of extremists in the Syrian opposition.

Recent reports continue this trend. Headlines on the jihadist offensives in Hama and Damascus refer to sectarian extremist fighters ambiguously as "Syrian rebels," and articles bury the extremists' ties to al-Qaeda several paragraphs down in the story, where most readers [6], who simply skim headlines and leads, do not tread.

AlterNet analyzed numerous reports in major outlets and detailed how they have egregiously understated the role of al-Qaeda-linked militants in the recent attacks in Syria — while, at the same moment, fueling paranoia about infrequent attacks in the West.

Al-Qaeda's PR strategy

Jabhat al-Nusra, Syria's former al-Qaeda affiliate, established itself as the most effective fighting force in the opposition committed to overthrowing the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Willing to carry out suicide bombings and attack its foes with unreserved brutality, it has taken on a leadership role in Syria, as even longtime supporters of U.S. regime change in the country have acknowledged [7].

The extremist group is not seeking freedom and democracy; rather, it hopes to create an ultra-reactionary Islamic state in Syria — and, eventually, beyond. Unlike its former ally ISIS (the two split in 2014), however, Jabhat al-Nusra has been much more careful with its public relations strategy.

Aware of the stigma of being associated with an international jihadist group that massacres civilians, al-Nusra formally distanced itself from al-Qaeda in mid-2016, and rebranded as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.

Then, in January of this year, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham created a new alliance: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham [8]. The group was formed in a merger of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham with other influential Salafi jihadist militias in Syria, including Nour al-Din al-Zinki, which had previously been CIA-vetted and armed with TOW anti-tank missiles by the U.S.

A few weeks before the Hama and Damascus attacks, Tahrir al-Sham released another video showing it using U.S.-manufactured anti-tank missiles [9] against the Syrian army in west Aleppo.

U.S.-made TOW missiles have ended up in the hands of a variety of extremist groups in Syria, including ISIS [10]. Before rebranding, Syria's official al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra [11] had taken anti-tank weapons from so-called moderate rebels, and close U.S. ally Saudi Arabia [12] has also transferred TOW missiles to militants in Syria.

Western media outlets have consistently treated Jabhat al-Nusra, in its various rebranded forms, differently than other branches of al-Qaeda, as it happens to be attacking Western enemies: the Syrian government and its allies Iran, Hezbollah and Russia.



The Hama Offensive

Tahrir al-Sham's attack near Hama on March 21 received extremely inadequate media coverage. Reuters [13] described the extremist militants merely as "Syrian rebels," titling its report "Syrian rebels press major assault near Hama." The major international news agency did not mention until the 11th paragraph that this "attack is being led by Tahrir al-Sham, an alliance of Islamist factions dominated by a group that was formerly al Qaeda's official affiliate in the Syrian war."

In another brief article entitled "Syrian rebels advance to within 4 km of Hama city - Observatory," Reuters [14] noted that the assault was being "spearheaded by the jihadist alliance," but did not report this alliance's ties to al-Qaeda.

Turkish media outlet the Anadolu Agency [15] was extremely misleading in its coverage. It titled its report "Syrian opposition makes gains near Hama," and opened the story writing, "The Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other opposition groups have reportedly made gains against regime forces as part of a new offensive near Hama city in west-central Syria."

The Anadolu Agency report did not mention once that this offensive is being led by rebranded al-Qaeda, as at least Reuters had belatedly acknowledged. The major Turkish news outlet completely left out this crucial detail.

The Turkish government supports Syrian militant groups, and has invested vast resources in trying to overthrow the Syrian government, in collaboration with the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Expert Marc Lynch, director of the Institute for Middle East Studies at George Washington University, noted [16] in his book *The New Arab Wars* that the idea of the so-called moderate Free Syrian Army, incessantly invoked by the U.S. and its allies, has been "something of a myth, with a media presence far outstripping its actual organizational capacity." Major media outlets continue to propagate this myth, nevertheless.

Middle East Monitor [17] wrote early in its report that "the Hama offensive also includes Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters who had agreed to a truce in December brokered by Russia and Turkey." The news outlet, which tends to take a pro-Gulf editorial stance, refers to Syrian government-aligned fighters as "Iranian-sponsored Shia jihadist militias," yet does not disclose until the 11th paragraph that, "Although the FSA are involved in the operation, the attack is being spearheaded by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, or the Syrian Liberation Organisation (SLO), an alliance of Islamist factions dominated by a group that was formerly Al-Qaeda's official affiliate in the Syrian war."

Syria Direct — a non-profit journalism organization that is partnered [18] with the U.S. State Department and Canadian government and that is funded by the Global Peace & Development Charitable Trust, which in turn is partnered with and funded [19] by Western governments and large corporations — was even more disingenuous in its coverage.

Syria Direct [20] did not even mention Tahrir al-Sham's connections to al-Qaeda; it simply described the extremist Salafi group as an "Islamist coalition," and noted it was fighting alongside an FSA-affiliated militia. The website also ambiguously titled its report "Syrian rebel forces launch campaign, again, to breach Hama city and airport."

While referring to numerous Salafi militias without mentioning their ties to al-Qaeda, Syria Direct also quoted three unidentified "rebel spokesmen," who "all stressed that the attack was not just a diversionary tactic but rather an all-out effort to breach the fortified regime bastion of Hama city, a long-sought prize for Syria's northern rebels."

Turkish state media TRT World [21] titled its report "Rebels launch fresh offensive ahead of Syria peace talks," and waited until the sixth paragraph to acknowledge the role of Al Qaeda in that offensive.

Al-Masdar News was one of the only news outlets to make the presence of the extremist militants clear in its headlines: "Jihadist rebels capture [22] key village in northern Hama," "Syrian Army reinforcements arrive to northern Hama to fend off jihadist offensive [23]" and "Jihadist rebels take control [24] of Khattab village in northern Hama."

Damascus Attacks

This was not the only recent jihadist-led offensive that was whitewashed by major media outlets in recent days.

On March 19, al-Qaeda's local franchise and the extremist group Ahrar al-Sham carried out an attack inside the center of Syria's capital, Damascus.

Ahrar al-Sham, a violent sectarian Salafi group that has at various points aligned itself with al-Qaeda, is supported by close U.S. allies Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

The Guardian published a report by the Associated Press [25] titled "Clashes in Damascus after rebels tunnel into government-held areas." The article did not mention until the eighth paragraph that the "Levant Liberation Committee (LLC), a group linked to al-Qaida, and the independent Failaq al-Rahman faction also participated in the attack."

The Associated Press article put the word terrorists in "scare quotes," writing, "Syrian state media said the military had repelled an attack by a group linked to al-Qaida after 'terrorists' infiltrated through tunnels in the middle of the night." Yet it did not use such scare quotes on the word "liberated" when writing, "The ultraconservative Ahrar al-Sham rebel faction said fighters had liberated the area."

"Artillery shells and rockets had landed in the heart of the city," the leading international news service noted, citing local residents. Like the pro-Gulf Middle East Monitor, the Associated Press stressed the presence of government-aligned "Shia militias" before it even acknowledged the fact that the militant-offensive was being led by an al-Qaeda-linked group.

On March 21, al-Qaeda-linked extremists launched a similar series of attacks on the outskirts of Damascus, in addition to the Hama offensive on the same day.

In the second paragraph of her report, titled "Resurgent Syrian Rebels Surprise Damascus With New Assaults," The New York Times [26]' Anne Barnard conceded that the fighters were "a mix of Islamist rebel groups and hard-line Qaeda-linked jihadists."

Reuters [27] was much less open in its reporting. The major international news agency did not acknowledge until the 20th paragraph that these attacks were led by an al-Qaeda-linked group, and only then indirectly, through the Syrian government. "The government says the attack is

being carried out by fighters of the Nusra Front, a jihadist group that was al Qaeda's official affiliate in the Syrian war until it declared they had broken off ties last year," Reuters wrote near the end of its report. "The Nusra Front is now part of an Islamist alliance called Tahrir al-Sham."

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham made it clear that their rebranding efforts were an attempt to gain more legitimacy and support. Major corporate media outlets are helping the extremist group accomplish this goal.