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The discovery of the “Khorasan Group” in Syria

By Niles Williamson

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As the United States opened up its bombing campaign in Syria this week, the so-called Khorasan Group was suddenly declared the newest and gravest threat to the United States and its European allies, overshadowing the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). According to US intelligence, Khorasan is a group of high-ranking foreign Al Qaeda members based in Syria that is seeking to launch a terrorist attack on US or European airlines.

The alleged existence of the Khorasan group was only made public a few days before the US began its campaign in Syria. Prior to last week, no one in the US government had ever publicly uttered the words “Khorasan group.” US President Barack Obama referred to it last Tuesday in his perfunctory statement announcing the new campaign in Syria.

Terrorism experts in the United States have stated that Khorasan is an outright invention of US intelligence. What the US government terms the Khorasan Group is in fact a small number of foreign Al Qaeda members fighting with the al Nusra Front, the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria, against the regime of President Bashar al Assad.

According to US intelligence, the Khorasan group is currently composed of several dozen Al Qaeda members who have traveled from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Libya and Chechnya. While the US government portrays them as a new and dangerous grouping in Syria, Aaron Zelin of the

Washington Institute for Near East Policy stated that the fighters singled out by US intelligence do not identify as the Khorasan Group.

The moniker invented by the Obama administration is derived from the nickname given to the fighters from the geographic area known as Khorasan, which includes western Afghanistan and eastern Iran, as well as parts of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

The supposedly looming threat of an attack by Khorasan has not only been deployed to browbeat the public into supporting the war in Syria, but also to justify the imposition of further antidemocratic measures in the United States, Europe and Australia. The mainstream media has latched onto the supposed threat from the Khorasan Group—darkly repeating the invented phrase as if it were a household word—to demand an escalation of the war in Syria and Iraq.

The intelligence community's sudden discovery of Khorasan is also being used to mask the fact that those being targeted are actually elements fighting with the Al Nusra Front, which is in an alliance with the so-called “moderates” in the Free Syria Army that Washington is backing with hundreds of millions of dollars in equipment, arms, and training.

Members of the US-supported Free Syrian Army have expressed their opposition to the targeting of Al Nusra's foreign fighters in last week's air strikes. Ali Bakran, a commander of an FSA brigade in Idlib, expressed his frustration over the recent attacks. “If they hit [ISIS] and the regime, it's okay, but why are they striking Nusra? Nusra are from the people—they are the people.”

While air attacks in Syria have focused primarily on ISIS, a barrage of missiles was launched against so-called Khorasan targets west of Aleppo on Tuesday. American officials claimed that the strikes were necessary because the previously unknown group was preparing to carry out an “imminent” attack on the US or Europe. The strikes reportedly killed top members of the group, including Musin al-Fadhli, who is accused of masterminding these plans.

FBI director James Comey and Pentagon spokesman Rear Adm. John Kirby, speaking individually to reporters on Thursday, both admitted that the US government did not have precise intelligence about where or when Khorasan was planning to strike.

Comey told reporters that the FBI had been tracking the Khorasan group for the last two years. He said that Syria was a place where the FBI didn't have “complete visibility” but “what I could see concerned me very much that they were working toward an attack.” Despite the lack of solid intelligence, he declared that it was correct to launch air strikes against the group inside Syria.

“It's hard to say whether [an attack will occur] tomorrow, three weeks from now or three months from now. But it's the kind of threat you have to operate under the assumption that it is tomorrow,” Comey added.

At the Pentagon's daily press conference, Kirby said that it did not matter that the government lacked concrete details on the attacks that were said to be imminent. “We can have this debate about whether it was valid to hit them or not, or whether it was too soon or too late,” he said.

Kirby added, “We hit them. And I don’t think we need to throw up a dossier here to prove that these are bad dudes.”

The “bad dudes,” including Fadhli, a close confidant of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan prior to the 9/11 attacks, have been closely tracked by the US government for more than a decade.

In 2005, the State Department identified Fadhli as an “Iran-based senior Al Qaeda facilitator and financier” and placed a \$7 million bounty on his head. He was accused at that time of providing support to Abu Musad Al-Zarqawi and Al Qaeda in Iraq, the group that would later develop into ISIS. Fadhli was also accused of participating in an attack on a French oil tanker in 2002 that killed one crew-member and spilled 50,000 barrels of crude oil.

In 2012, the Treasury Department singled out Fadhli as the leader of Al Qaeda in Iran and blamed the Iranian government for allowing him to funnel money and fighters into Syria and South Asia. Then last year, American intelligence officials claim, Fadhli was dispatched to Syria by the current leader of Al Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahri, to establish a cell within the Al Nusra Front, the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria, that would plan attacks on US and European targets.

Khorasan’s other alleged members include leading Al Qaeda sniper and trainer Abu Yusef al-Turki, and Al Qaeda’s main strategist and policy maker Sanafi al-Nasr.

US officials claim that cruise missiles launched from US warships in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea hit training camps, a bomb factory, a communications building and a command-and-control center. US intelligence has alleged the group was using its Syrian headquarters for testing non-metallic explosives that could make it past airport security. This supposed threat from Khorasan was the motivation for the imposition in July of a ban on uncharged cell phones and laptops on flights from Europe, Africa and the Middle East. It has also been claimed that the group is working to develop a toothpaste tube bomb, leading to the banning of toothpaste tubes on all flights to Russia in February.

Like the name itself, which is an invention of the US intelligence apparatus, none of these allegations or claims can be taken at face value. What is revealed to the public about these murky groups is only what furthers US war propaganda. Carefully concealed are their ties to US imperialism and its regional allies.

While invoking the alleged existence of an Al Qaeda cell in Syria to terrorize the public, Washington is simultaneously arming and funding Al Qaeda-linked “rebels” to further its aim of regime change in Syria.