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How US Allies Aid Al Qaeda in Syria

By Daniel Lazare

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Exclusive: The dirty secret about the Obama administration’s “regime change” strategy in Syria is that it amounts to a de facto alliance with Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front which is driving toward a possible victory with direct and indirect aid from Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel, as Daniel Lazare explains.

When the U.S. and Turkey announced on July 23 that they were joining forces to establish a “safe zone” in northern Syria, no one could quite figure out what they meant. With the White House denying that the deal required it to send in troops to seal the zone off or warplanes to patrol the skies, Bloomberg’s Josh Rogin wrote that the whole thing was misnomer: “In fact, there is really no ‘zone,’ and there is no plan to keep the area ‘safe.’”

Indeed, Rogin said, three “senior administration officials” had put together a conference call in order to assure reporters that there were no plans “for a safe zone, a no-fly zone, an air-exclusionary zone, a humanitarian buffer zone, or any other protected zone of any kind.” So if that wasn’t the plan, what on earth was it?

Now we know. The purpose of the non-zone zone that Turkey and the U.S. may or may not wish to establish is to give the former a free hand to bomb the Kurds and the latter an opportunity to engage in joint operations with Al Qaeda.

The proof? A front-page article in the Aug. 1 *New York Times* reporting that a U.S.-trained rebel unit, known as Division 30, which had been sent into Syria to combat ISIS, had come “under intense attack on Friday from a different hardline Islamist faction ... the Nusra Front, which is affiliated with Al Qaeda.”

This is no big news in itself since the Syrian opposition’s myriad rebel factions, one more hardline than the next, are constantly battling one another for control of arms, territory, resources and personnel. But what was new was the fact that the trainees had been caught off guard.

As *The Times*’s Anne Bernard and Eric Schmitt reported: “American military trainers ... did not anticipate an assault from the Nusra Front. In fact, officials said on Friday, they expected the Nusra Front to welcome Division 30 as an ally in its fight against the Islamic State. ‘This wasn’t supposed to happen like this,’ said one former senior American official.”

In other words, Defense Department officials expected Al Nusra to see Division 30 as friends and were perplexed when it didn’t. The Americans “had no known plans to fight the Nusra Front,” the *Times* went on, adding that, while “allied with Al Qaeda,” Nusra “is seen by many insurgents in Syria as preferable to the Islamic State, and it sometimes cooperates with other less radical groups against both the Islamic State and Syrian government forces.”

According to the London *Independent*, a “distracted” Division 30 commander whom it managed to catch up with in Turkey said that he and one of the captured trainees had actually met with an Al Nusra leader ten days earlier to work out a truce. “They said that if even one bullet reached them, they would attack us, but we assured them we were there only to fight Daesh [i.e. ISIS],” he said.

But even though Division 30 had kept its part of the bargain, Al Nusra was now beating the captured trainees and parading them in the hot afternoon sun with their shirts pulled over their heads while Al Nusra fighters accused them of “collaborat[ing] with the crusader coalition.”

So when the *New York Times* announced that the U.S.-Turkish plan “would create what officials from both countries are calling an Islamic State-free zone controlled by relatively moderate Syrian insurgents,” it’s now clear who those “moderates” are: Al Nusra. The zone would be safe for U.S.-trained forces, which numbered only around 60 fighters prior to last week’s attack, but it would be mainly safe for the much larger and more powerful Syrian branch of Al Qaeda.

Teaming Up with Al Qaeda?

The U.S. teaming up with Al Qaeda – how can this be? Although the press doesn’t like to talk about it, there in fact has hardly been a moment in recent history when the U.S. has not worked hand in glove with the most dangerous fundamentalist forces.

It goes all the way back to President Dwight Eisenhower who, as Ian Johnson noted in his excellent book, *A Mosque in Munich* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), was always eager “to stress the ‘holy war’ aspect” in his talks with Muslims leaders according to an internal White

House memo and, when informed that jihad might be directed against Israel, replied that the Saudis had assured him that it would only be used against the Soviets.

More recently, President Jimmy Carter and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski opted to put the Eisenhower Doctrine to the test by channeling money and arms to Afghan mujahedeen battling a Soviet-backed government in Kabul. The effort, which eventually – under President Ronald Reagan – morphed into a \$20-billion-plus joint operation by the Saudis and CIA, no doubt contributed to the collapse of the U.S.S.R., Brzezinski's top priority.

But it also destroyed Afghan society, paved the way for the Taliban takeover in 1996, gave rise to Al Qaeda, and, of course, led directly to the destruction of the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan.

The U.S. may have backed off thereafter, although it continued to maintain close relations with Saudi Arabia, which, according to Zacarias Moussaoui, the so-called “twentieth hijacker,” maintained close ties with Osama bin Laden right up to the eve of 9/11. [See Consortiumnews.com's “The Secret Saudi Ties to Terrorism.”]

But by 2007, as Seymour Hersh argued not at all implausibly in *The New Yorker*, the Saudis had succeeded in convincing the Bush administration to concentrate on battling Shi'ite forces instead. This meant not only lightening up on Al Qaeda, but cooperating with increasing militant Sunni groups in order to pursue the fight against Hezbollah and other such Shi'ite forces.

The consequences have grown more and more evident ever since the Arab Spring caught up with the Assad family dictatorship in February 2011. Washington's pro-Sunni orientation required that it ignore reports that the radical-Sunni Muslim Brotherhood was dominating the protests, which were taking on an ugly and bigoted anti-Shi'ite and anti-Christian coloration as the Assads – who are of Shi'ite origin but otherwise non-sectarian – struggled to maintain control.

When fighting broke out, the “re-direction,” as Hersh called it, also required that the U.S. steer money and aid to Sunni rebels and even that it rely on the Muslim Brotherhood, according to the *Times*, to determine which groups were deserving and which were not.

In order to rein in the Shi'ites, the U.S. thus threw its weight behind ultra-Sunni Saudi Arabia and its program of bloody sectarian warfare. As Vice President Joe Biden put it at Harvard's Kennedy School last October, Saudi Arabia and the gulf states “were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad except the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and Al Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world.”

In August 2012, a Defense Intelligence Agency noted that Al Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, and assorted Salafists were “the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria”; that the Western powers, the gulf states, and the Turks were solidly behind the uprising; that Al Qaeda was seeking to use the revolt to unite all Sunnis in a general anti-Shi'ite jihad; that the holy warriors were likely to establish “a declared or undeclared Salafist principality in eastern Syria,” and that

“this is exactly what the supporting powers want, in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of the Shia expansion (Iraq and Iran).”

Although the consequences would be disastrous for Syria’s Christian, Druze and Alawite-Shi‘ite minorities, the U.S. went along and the mainstream press supplied the all-important cover-up.

A Non-Aggression Pact

The non-aggression pact that Defense Department thought it had hammered out with Al Nusra is the latest step in this strategy. While the Obama administration claims to be battling ISIS, its attitude toward the hyper-brutal group is more ambiguous than it lets on. The U.S. only raised the alarm when ISIS invaded Iraq in June 2014 and began threatening the American-backed government in Baghdad.

Before then, the U.S. was content to sit back and watch while ISIS made life miserable for Assad and the Baathists in Damascus. Turkey claims to oppose ISIS as well even though it has allowed Daesh to turn its 550-mile border with Syria into “an open highway for jihadists from around the world.”

After ISIS bombed a left-wing, pro-Kurdish rally in the border town of Suruç, killing 32 people and injuring more than a hundred, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan vowed to get tough. But instead of ISIS, he got tough with the Kurds, bombing targets in northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey associated with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) even though the PKK, along with its Syrian branch, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) is one of the few effective anti-ISIS forces in the field.

As Reuters observed, “Turkey’s assaults on the PKK have so far been much heavier than its strikes against Islamic State, fueling suspicions that its real agenda is keeping Kurdish political and territorial ambitions in check.”

Indeed, Erdogan’s agenda may be even more convoluted than that since striking out at the PKK may serve to undermine the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP), which, after an impressive 13-percent showing in June’s elections, poses a growing danger to his rule.

Further, Turkey and other U.S. allies in the region have packaged their attacks on the most effective anti-ISIS forces as indirect ways to undermine ISIS. Turkey offers the curious belief that the best way to defeat ISIS is by defeating the Kurds.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia claims the best way to defeat ISIS is by toppling Assad since his determination to remain in power is supposedly what fuels Sunni anger, which in turn fuels the growth of ISIS. This rationale holds that even though Assad’s Syrian Arab Army is one of the few bulwarks against an ISIS victory, defeating Assad is suppose to somehow spell doom for ISIS.

Another country that claims to want to see ISIS go down in flames is Israel, except that whenever it intervenes in the Syrian civil war, it ends up bombing Assad's forces and their Shi'ite allies, including Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iranian military advisers.

So, everyone claims to want to defeat ISIS, yet everyone bombs precisely those forces that are working to stop ISIS. Of course, the most convoluted agenda of all is that of the U.S. The Obama administration seems to believe that defeating ISIS is the top goal, except when it says that priority number one is overthrowing Assad.

As the Times blandly puts it with regard to units like Division 30: "The training [of Division 30 to combat ISIS] is often at cross-purposes with a covert C.I.A. training program for fighters battling Syrian security forces. Toppling Mr. Assad was the original goal of the Syrian revolt, before the Islamic State sprang from its most extreme Islamist wing." (However, the actual history of ISIS is that it emerged from the Sunni resistance to the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, originally calling itself "Al Qaeda in Iraq" before joining the war against Assad and taking the name "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" or simply the "Islamic State.")

What's the Priority?

Based on recent developments, one might ask: is toppling Assad yesterday's top goal superseded by today's top goal of defeating ISIS – or is it the other way around? Meanwhile, the U.S. policy is to bomb ISIS whenever possible except when it is engaged in battle with Syrian government forces, at which point the U.S. policy is to hold off.

Explained the Times's Anne Bernard: "In Syria, a new awkwardness arises. Any airstrikes against Islamic State militants in and around Palmyra would probably benefit the forces of President Bashar al-Assad. So far, United States-led airstrikes in Syria have largely focused on areas far outside government control, to avoid the perception of aiding a leader whose ouster President Obama has called for."

In other words, the U.S. bombs ISIS except when it might help the most potent force fighting ISIS. Washington is also at war with Al Nusra – sometimes. In early July, for instance, a U.S. air strike killed seven Al Nusra members in Idlib Province in northern Syria. But America's neocons disapprove of such strikes because they may indirectly benefit Assad's forces.

Neocons were gleeful when a Nusra-led coalition swept through Idlib in April with support from the U.S.-backed Free Syrian Army, while the administration remained conspicuously silent about the large numbers of U.S.-made TOW missiles – almost certainly supplied by the Saudis – that provided Al Nusra with a critical edge. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Climbing into Bed with Al-Qaeda."]

So the U.S. opposes Al Nusra except when it supports it. Indeed, just about every player in the Middle East is busy playing both sides of the fence, which is why ISIS and Al Qaeda are doing so well.

As Karl Sharro, a Lebanese architect turned political satirist, noted: “Obama is an astute strategist. His plan centers on supporting Kurdish factions as he also supports Turkey which is now attacking the Kurds while also supporting Saudi Arabia in its war in Yemen which upsets Iran whom U.S. forces are collaborating with in fighting ISIS in Iraq as he simultaneously yields to pressure from allies to weaken Assad in Syria which complicates things further with Iran which he pacifies by signing the nuclear deal upsetting America’s traditional friend Israel whose anger is absorbed with shipments of advanced weapons escalating the arms race in the region.”

Exactly. It would all be quite funny if the consequences – 220,000 deaths in Syria, millions more displaced, plus widespread destruction in Yemen where nightly Saudi air raids are now in their sixth month – weren’t so tragic.