

Reporting (or Not) the Ties Between US-Armed Syrian Rebels and Al Qaeda's Affiliate

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A crucial problem in news media coverage of the Syrian civil war has been how to characterize the relationship between the so-called “moderate” opposition forces armed by the CIA, on one hand, and the Al Qaeda franchise Al Nusra Front (and its close ally Ahrar al Sham), on the other. But it is a politically sensitive issue for US policy, which seeks to overthrow Syria's government without seeming to make common cause with the movement responsible for 9/11, and the system of news production has worked effectively to prevent the news media from reporting it fully and accurately.

The Obama administration has long portrayed the opposition groups it has been arming with anti-tank weapons as independent of Nusra Front. In reality, the administration has been relying on the close cooperation of these “moderate” groups with Nusra Front to put pressure on the Syrian government. The United States and its allies—especially Saudi Arabia and Turkey—want the civil war to end with the dissolution of the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who is backed by US rivals like Russia and Iran.

Reflecting the fact that Nusra Front was created by Al Qaeda and has confirmed its loyalty to it, the administration designated Nusra as a terrorist organization in 2013. But the US has carried out very few airstrikes against it since then, in contrast to the other offspring of Al Qaeda, the Islamic State or ISIS (Daesh), which has been the subject of intense air attacks from the US and its European allies. The US has remained silent about Nusra Front's leading role in the military effort against Assad, concealing the fact that Nusra's success in northwest Syria has been a key element in Secretary of State John Kerry's diplomatic strategy for Syria.

When Russian intervention in support of the Syrian government began last September, targeting not only ISIS but also the Nusra Front and US-supported groups allied with them against the Assad regime, the Obama administration immediately argued that Russian airstrikes were targeting “moderate” groups rather than ISIS, and insisted that those strikes had to stop.



New Arab: Coming Together to Fight Assad in Aleppo

New Arab (5/8/15). Note that the Syrians “coming together to fight Assad” are doing so under the leadership of an Al Qaeda affiliate.

The willingness of the news media to go beyond the official line and report the truth on the ground in Syria was thus put to the test. It had been well-documented that those “moderate” groups had been thoroughly integrated into the military campaigns directed by Nusra Front and Ahrar al Sham in the main battlefield of the war in northwestern Syria's Idlib and Aleppo provinces. For example, a

[dispatch from Aleppo last May](#) in **Al Araby Al-Jadeed** (**The New Arab**), a daily newspaper financed by the Qatari royal family, revealed that every one of at least ten “moderate” factions in the province

supported by the CIA had joined the Nusra-run province command Fateh Halab (Conquest of Aleppo). Formally the command was run by Ahrar al Sham, and Nusra Front was excluded from it.

But as **Al Araby**'s reporter explained, that exclusion "means that the operation has a better chance of receiving regional and international support." That was an indirect way of saying that Nusra's supposed exclusion was a device aimed at facilitating the Obama administration's approval of sending more TOW missiles to the "moderates" in the province, because the White House could not support groups working directly with a terrorist organization. A further implication was that Nusra Front was allowing "moderate" groups to obtain those weapons from the United States and its Saudi and Turkish allies, because those groups were viewed as too weak to operate independently of the Salafist-jihadist forces—and because some of those arms would be shared with Nusra Front and Ahrar.

After Nusra Front was formally identified as a terrorist organization for the purposes of a Syrian ceasefire and negotiations, it virtually went underground in areas close to the Turkish border. A journalist who lives in northern Aleppo province **told Al Monitor** that Nusra Front had stopped flying its own flag and was concealing its troops under those of Ahrar al Sham, which had been accepted by the United States as a participant in the talks. That maneuver was aimed at supporting the argument that "moderate" groups and not Al Qaeda were being targeted by Russian airstrikes.

But a review of the coverage of the targeting of Russian airstrikes and the role of U.S.-supported armed groups in the war during the first few weeks in the three most influential US newspapers with the most resources for reporting accurately on the issue—the **New York Times**, **Washington Post** and **Wall Street Journal**—reveals a pattern of stories that tilted strongly in the direction desired by the Obama administration, either ignoring the subordination of the "moderate" groups to Nusra Front entirely or giving it only the slightest mention.

Russia defends Syria airstrikes amid claims of blows to U.S.-backed rebels

Washington Post (10/1/15)

A screenshot of a Washington Post article. At the top, there are navigation icons and a '2533' count. Below that is a 'Save for Later' and 'Reading List' button. The main content area features a video player with the title 'Russian airstrikes in Syria, explained' and a 'Play Video 1:31' button. The video shows a large explosion in a town. Below the video is a text snippet: 'Here's what you need to know about Russia's airstrikes in Syria. The Russian military claims the strikes target the Islamic State, but U.S. officials say Russia is not helping. (Jason Aldag/The Washington Post)'. To the right of the video is an Amazon.com advertisement for 'Gotham: Season 2' and 'Gotham: Season 1'.

WaPo: Russia Defends Syria Airstrikes

In an **October 1** article, **Washington Post** Beirut correspondent Liz Sly wrote that the Russian airstrikes were being "conducted against one of the few areas in the country where moderate rebels still have a foothold and from which the Islamic State was ejected more than a year and a half ago." To her credit, Sly did report, "Some of the towns struck are strongholds of recently formed coalition Jaish al Fateh," which she said included Nusra Front and "an assortment of Islamist and moderate factions." What was missing, however, was the fact that Jaish al

Fateh was not merely a "coalition" but a military command structure, meaning that a much tighter relationship existed between the US-supported "moderates" and the Al Qaeda franchise.

Sly referred specifically to one strike that hit a training camp in the outskirts of a town in Idlib province belonging to Suqor al-Jabal, which had been armed by the CIA. But readers could not evaluate that statement without the crucial fact, **reported in the regional press**, that Suqor al-Jabal was one of the many CIA-supported organizations that had joined the Fateh Halab ("Conquest of Aleppo"), the military command center in Aleppo ostensibly run by Ahrar al Sham, Nusra Front's closest ally, but in fact under firm Nusra control. The report thus conveyed the false impression that the CIA-supported rebel group was still independent of Nusra Front.

U.S. Weaponry Is Turning Syria Into Proxy War With Russia

By ANNE BARNARD and KARAM SHOUMALI OCT. 12, 2015



Syrian soldiers under attack Sunday in Hama Province. Government troops advanced there Monday, aided by

NYT: *US Weaponry Is Turning Syria Into Proxy War With Russia*

New York Times (10/13/15)

An article by **New York Times** Beirut correspondent Anne Barnard (co-authored by the **Times** stringer in Syria Karam Shoumali—[10/13/15](#)) appeared to veer off in the direction of treating the US-supported opposition groups as part of a new US/Russian proxy war, thus drawing attention away from the issue of whether the Obama administration support for “moderate” groups was actually contributing to the political-military power of Al Qaeda in Syria. Under the headline “US Weaponry Is Turning Syria Into Proxy War With Russia,” it reported that armed opposition groups had

just received large shipments of TOW anti-tank missiles that had to be approved by the United States. Quoting the confident statements of rebel commanders about the effectiveness of the missiles and the high morale of rebel troops, the story suggested that arming the “moderates” was a way for the United States to make them the primary force on one side of a war pitting the United States against Russia in Syria.

Near the end of the story, however, Barnard effectively undermined that “proxy war” theme by citing the admission by commanders of US-supported brigades of their “uncomfortable marriage of necessity” with the Al Qaeda franchise, “because they cannot operate without the consent of the larger and stronger Nusra Front.” Referring to the capture of Idlib the previous spring by the opposition coalition, Barnard recalled that the TOW missiles had “played a major role in the insurgent advances that eventually endangered Mr. Assad’s rule.” But, she added:

While that would seem like a welcome development for United States policy makers, in practice it presented another quandary, given that the Nusra Front was among the groups benefiting from the enhanced firepower.

Unfortunately, Barnard’s point that US-supported groups were deeply embedded in an Al Qaeda-controlled military structure was buried at the end of a long piece, and thus easily missed. The headline and lead ensured that, for the vast majority of readers, that point would be lost in the larger thrust of the article.

U.S. Sees Russian Drive Against CIA-Backed Rebels in Syria

White House noncommittal about coming to aid of its allies



Tension builds as Russia targets CIA-backed rebels in Syria and violates Turkish airspace, drawing a rebuke from the U.S. State Department. Mark Kelly reports.

WSJ: *US Sees Russian Drive Against US-Backed Rebels in Syria*

Wall Street Journal (10/5/15)

The **Wall Street Journal**’s Adam Entous approached the problem from a different angle but with the same result. He wrote [a story on October 5](#) reflecting what he said was anger on the part of US officials that the Russians were deliberately targeting opposition groups that the CIA had supported. Entous reported that US officials believed the Syrian government wanted those groups targeted because of their possession of TOW missiles, which had

been the key factor in the opposition’s capture of Idlib earlier in the year. But nowhere in the article was the

role of CIA-supported groups within military command structures dominated by Nusra Front even acknowledged.

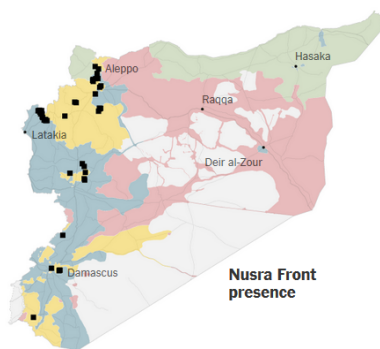
Still another angle on the problem was adopted in an [October 12 article](#) by **Journal** Beirut correspondent Raja Abdulrahim, who described the Russian air offensive as having spurred US-backed rebels and the Nusra Front to form a “more united front against the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian allies.” Abdulrahim thus acknowledged the close military collaboration with Nusra Front, but blamed it all on the Russian offensive. And the story ignored the fact that those same opposition groups had already joined military command arrangements in Idlib and Aleppo earlier in 2015, in anticipation of victories across northeast Syria.

The image in the media of the US-supported armed opposition as operating independently from Nusra Front, and as victims of Russian attacks, persisted into early 2016. But in February, the first cracks in that image appeared in the **Washington Post** and **New York Times**.

Reporting on the negotiations between Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on a partial ceasefire that began on February 12, **Washington Post** associate editor and senior national security correspondent Karen DeYoung [wrote on February 19](#) that an unresolved problem was how to decide which organizations were to be considered “terrorist groups” in the ceasefire agreement. In that context, DeYoung wrote, “Jabhat al-Nusra, whose forces are intermingled with moderate rebel groups in the northwest near the Turkish border, is particularly problematic.”

It was the first time any major news outlet had reported that US-supported armed opposition and Nusra Front front troops were “intermingled” on the ground. And in the very next sentence DeYoung dropped what should have been a political bombshell: She reported that Kerry had proposed in the Munich negotiations to “leave Jabhat al Nusra off limits to bombing, as part of a ceasefire, at least temporarily, until the groups can be sorted out.” At the same time, Kerry was [publicly demanding in a speech](#) at the Munich conference that Russia halt its attacks on “legitimate opposition groups” as a condition for a ceasefire.

Kerry’s negotiating position reflected the fact that CIA groups were certain to be hit in strikes on areas controlled by Nusra Front, as well as the reality that Al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front and Ahrar al Sham were central to the success of the US-backed military effort against Assad.



The Nusra Front is embedded in rebel-controlled areas. It recently became more active in parts of Aleppo as rebels welcomed their help against the government.

New York Times: Nusra Front presence

New York Times (2/22/16). In an accompanying story, the **Times** described Nusra as “an insurgent group linked to Al Qaeda.”

In the end, however, Lavrov rejected the proposal to protect Nusra Front targets from Russian airstrikes, and Kerry dropped that demand, allowing the joint US/Russian announcement of the partial ceasefire on February 22. Up to that point, maps of the Syrian war in the **Post** and **Times** had identified zones of control only for “rebels” without showing where Nusra Front forces were in control. But on the same day as the announcement, the **New York Times** [published an “updated” map](#), accompanied by text stating that Nusra Front “is embedded in the area of Aleppo and northwest toward the Turkish border.”

At the State Department briefing the next day, reporters grilled spokesman Mark Toner on whether US-supported rebel forces were “commingled” with Nusra Front forces in Aleppo and northward. After a

very long exchange on the subject, Toner said, “Yes, I believe there is some commingling of these groups.” And he went on to say, speaking on behalf of the International Syria Support Group, which comprises all the countries involved in the Syrian peace negotiations, including the US and Russia:

We, the ISSG, have been very clear in saying that Al Nusra and Daesh [ISIS] are not part of any kind of cease-fire or any kind of negotiated cessation of hostilities. So if you hang out with the wrong folks, then you make that decision.... You choose who hang out with, and that sends a signal.

Although I pointed out the significance of the statement (**Truthout**, [2/24/16](#)), no major news outlet saw fit to report that remarkable acknowledgement by the State Department spokesperson. Nevertheless, the State Department had clearly alerted the **Washington Post** and the **New York Times** to the fact that the relationships between the CIA-supported groups and Nusra Front were much closer than it had ever admitted in the past.

Kerry evidently calculated that the pretense that the “moderate” armed groups were independent of Al Nusra front would open him to a political attack from Republicans and the media if they were hit by Russian airstrikes. So it was no longer useful politically to try to obscure that reality from the media. In fact, the State Department now seemed interested in inducing as many of those armed groups as possible to separate themselves more clearly from the Nusra Front.

The twists and turns in the three major newspapers’ coverage of the issue of relations between US-supported opposition groups and Al Qaeda’s franchise in Syria thus show how major news sources slighted or steered clear of the fact that US client armed groups were closely intertwined with a branch of Al Qaeda—until they were prompted by signals from US officials to revise their line and provide a more honest portrayal of Syria’s armed opposition.

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