

# Washington-backed “rebels” surrender US arms to Al Qaeda in Syria

By Bill Van Auken  
4 November 2014

Washington’s strategy in its three-month-old war in Iraq and Syria appeared to suffer another humiliating blow over the weekend as one of the last remaining strongholds of US-backed “moderate rebels” in the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib fell to the Nusra Front, the Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda.

The collapse of the US-backed force in Syria came amid reported plans for a major retraining of the Iraqi army in preparation for a US-orchestrated offensive against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Iraq sometime next year.

Both developments underscore the unreliability of the proxy forces the Obama administration has indicated are to serve as the “boots on the ground” in the two countries and point to the inevitable expansion of the number and role of US troops deployed to prosecute the new Middle East war.

*Washington Post* correspondent Liz Sly, who has been one of the most enthusiastic media propagandists for the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the so-called “moderate rebels,” questioned whether the FSA would “manage to survive the trouncing inflicted in recent days” by the Nusra Front. She described the events in Idlib as “throwing the rebels into disarray and upending the Obama administration’s hopes for a moderate alternative to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.”

The “trouncing” was accomplished without a shot being fired. Two US-backed groups, the Syrian Revolutionary Front and Harakat Hazm (Steadfastness Movement), surrendered without opposing the Al Qaeda-linked militia. It was reported that a large number of their members went over to the Nusra Front, while others fled.

The clashes between the various “rebel” groups have been developing and growing in intensity for over a

year, pitting the Nusra Front and ISIS (which Al Qaeda disavowed earlier this year) against other US-backed groups as well as against each other. While these conflicts have been attributed in some instances to Islamist ideological differences, they have often arisen over control of oil and gas fields, border crossings and other sources of wealth.

One of the reasons for the latest clashes appears to be the US air strikes against Nusra Front positions in Syria, carried out under the pretext of disrupting a previously unheard of “Khorasan group,” which was supposedly plotting attacks against the West. The reaction of the Nusra Front, which had previously fought together with the Western-backed militias against ISIS, has been an offensive against US-backed groups, which it sees as a threat. The US attacks also have led to a mending of fences between the Nusra Front and ISIS, which have recently fought together in joint operations.

In the latest developments, significant stocks of arms supplied by the US, including heavy weapons such as TOW anti-tank missiles and Grad rockets, have been turned over by the so-called moderates to the Nusra Front, which is classified by Washington as a foreign terrorist organization.

“For the United States, the weapons they supplied falling into the hands of Al Qaeda is a realization of a nightmare,” the British daily *Telegraph* commented.

Following the overrunning of the northern Idlib province villages previously held by the Syrian Revolutionary Front and Harakat Hazm, Nusra Front fighters have reportedly begun massing near a strategic Syrian town on the Turkish border, Bab al-Hawa, which has served as a key pipeline for arms and supplies funneled by Washington and its allies to the “rebels.” It is also a major smuggling route, providing

whoever controls it with a reliable source of revenue.

Despite support from the US, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf State monarchies, the so-called “moderate rebels” never developed into a serious force, with the Western-backed war for regime-change in Syria remaining dominated by extreme Islamist groups such as ISIS and the Nusra Front. Nonetheless, Washington had hoped to draw on these “moderate” militias to carry out its stated plan to train 5,000 fighters a year as a new force to be turned against both ISIS and the Assad government. That plan now lies in ruins.

An article by independent journalist Theo Padnos in the Sunday magazine section of the *New York Times* on his abduction and two-year imprisonment by the Nusra Front in Syria is instructive in terms of the reliability and allegiance of supposedly “vetted” forces.

In the article, entitled “My Captivity,” Padnos recounts how not once, but twice, he managed to escape from his Nusra Front captors and seek aid from the so-called moderates of the Free Syrian Army, only to be quickly handed back to the Al Qaeda-affiliated group.

He also writes that FSA soldiers, who were fighting alongside the Nusra Front group that was holding him about 20 miles east of Damascus, told him that they had recently returned from training at a US base in Jordan, ostensibly for the purpose of combating groups such as the Nusra Front and ISIS.

Asked by Padnos about fighting the Nusra Front, one of the FSA fighters replied, “Oh that, we lied to the Americans about that.”

In Iraq, meanwhile, the *New York Times* reported Monday that US and Iraqi officials have agreed to prepare a “major spring offensive” against ISIS, which the newspaper notes “is likely to face an array of logistical and political challenges.”

At the center of these plans is the US training of three new Iraqi divisions, some 20,000 troops, to replace units that disintegrated in the face of the ISIS offensive last summer, with commanders deserting and troops throwing down their weapons, tearing off their uniforms and fleeing for their lives. The Pentagon had spent \$25 billion over the course of eight years to train those forces.

To prepare for the planned offensive, the Pentagon, according to the *Times*, has set up a new task force under Lt. Gen. James Terry, the top Army commander

for CENTCOM, which oversees all US forces in the Middle East. The newspaper reports that as these preparations are implemented “the American footprint is likely to expand from Baghdad and Ebril to additional outposts,” including in the predominantly Sunni Anbar province, which has been largely overrun by ISIS.

Citing senior US officials, the *Times* reported that “Army planners have drafted options that could deploy up to an additional brigade of troops, or about 3,500 personnel, to expand the advisory effort and speed the push to rebuild the Iraqi military.”

No matter how many US “advisers” Washington deploys to the country, however, the contradictions underlying the US intervention—not least the bitter sectarian divisions provoked by a decade of US war and occupation—are overwhelming. The Iraqi army that Washington claims will do the fighting in predominantly Sunni areas such as Anbar is some 90 percent Shia and is seen by the population in these areas as an occupying force. Moreover, in recent fighting, the army has leaned heavily on Shia militias that have openly engaged in ethnic cleansing operations against Sunni populations.

Until now, Washington has tried to paper over these contradictions while waging a sporadic campaign of air strikes that has had little effect on ISIS’ control over a broad swath of Iraq and Syria. The real war is still to come and will be launched in earnest once today’s midterm elections are over. Given the sorry state of Washington’s chosen proxy forces in both Iraq and Syria and the real aims that it is pursuing—US imperialist hegemony over the entire Middle East—sooner rather than later this new war will involve large numbers of US ground troops in another killing spree.

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