

Are the U.S. and Allies Getting Too Cozy With Al Qaeda's Affiliate in Syria?

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Global Research, July 29, 2015

[Information Clearing House](#) 28 July 2015

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [Terrorism](#)

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*For 14 years the US has waged a global war on terror with a [stated goal](#) of denying al Qaeda a safe haven anywhere in the world. Now several of our regional partners in the Middle East, hell-bent on removing Assad from power, are backing a coalition of Syrian rebel groups that include the local al Qaeda affiliate **Jabhat al Nusra** as a prominent member – and at least one high ranking former US military official thinks working with al Qaeda is justified. The rebel coalition, backed by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, is calling itself the Army of Conquest, and has recently made gains against Assad consolidating territory in Idlib province.*

Reporting on al Nusra's recent victories in Idlib, Charles Lister at Brookings [reported](#):

Several commanders involved in leading recent Idlib operations confirmed to this author that the U.S.-led operations room in southern Turkey, which coordinates the provision of lethal and non-lethal support to vetted opposition groups, was instrumental in facilitating their involvement in the operation from early April onwards. That operations room — along with another in Jordan, which covers Syria's south — also appears to have dramatically increased its level of assistance and provision of intelligence to vetted groups in recent weeks.

Whereas these multinational operations rooms have previously demanded that recipients of military assistance cease direct coordination with groups like Jabhat al-Nusra, recent dynamics in Idlib appear to have demonstrated something different. Not only were weapons shipments increased to the so-called “vetted groups,” but **the operations room specifically encouraged a closer cooperation with Islamists** commanding frontline operations. [emphasis added]

As news of the coalition victories spread, the Wall Street Journal published a [piece](#) entitled “To US Allies, Al Qaeda Affiliate in Syria Becomes the Lesser Evil” that reinforces the possibility some U.S. military leaders also see such collaboration with al Qaeda as a legitimate option. The author of the article spoke with retired US Admiral James Stavridis, a recent Supreme Allied Commander of NATO who oversaw the 2011 Libya campaign. Discussing the new role of key US allies backing a coalition that includes the al Qaeda affiliate, the Admiral compared the relationship to partnering with Stalin in World War II:

It is unlikely we are going to operate side by side with cadres from Nusra, **but if our allies are working with them, that is acceptable.** If you look back to World War II, we had coalitions with people that we had extreme

disagreements with, including Stalin's Russia," said Mr. Stavridis, now dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in Boston.

I don't think that is a showstopper for the U.S. in terms of engaging with that coalition. [emphasis added]

It is important to note that the head of al Nusra though indicating an unwillingness to attack the West for now, still pledges [allegiance to Ayman Zawahiri](#), the long time deputy to Osama Bin Laden, and currently the official head of Al Qaeda. In addition, [human rights groups have pointed to](#) al Nusra's "systematic and widespread violations including targeting civilians, kidnappings, and executions." Al Nusra has engaged in lethal car bombing attacks targeting civilians and they have actively recruited child soldiers. Like ISIS, al Nusra has treated women and girls in areas they control particularly harshly. In addition to strict and [discriminatory rules on dress, employment and freedom of movement](#) there have been [abductions of women](#) and even [executions of at least one woman](#) accused of adultery.

Despite all this, retired Adm. Stavridis isn't the only commentator who finds our allies' involvement with al Nusra 'acceptable'. The prominent foreign policy journal, *Foreign Affairs* published a piece this year entitled "[Accepting Al Qaeda: The Enemy of the United States' Enemy.](#)" The author, Barak Mendelsohn, makes the case that al Qaeda staying "afloat" is better for US interests, citing threats to US allies from Iran and the Islamic State. A couple weeks later Lina Khatib, the director of the Carnegie Middle East Center, wrote in a [piece](#) that "Nusra's pragmatism and ongoing evolution mean that it could become an ally in the fight against the Islamic State".

Even some Israeli leaders have publicly proclaimed the Sunni militants as the lesser evil in the 'long war' against Iran and its allies. In 2013, the Israeli Ambassador to the US and a close advisor to Prime Minister Netanyahu, Michael Oren, said in an [interview](#) with the Jerusalem Post,

"We always wanted Bashar Assad to go, we always preferred the bad guys who weren't backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran."

He specifically added, that this was the case, even if the "bad guys" were affiliated with al-Qaeda. Multiple media [reports](#) have recently detailed an Israeli policy of giving medical care to wounded Syrian rebels belonging to al Nusra.

The Obama administration has for the most part signaled a reluctance to arm Syrian rebels affiliated with al Qaeda, but has not publicly opposed the new coalition backed by regional partners such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Indeed as the Saudi monarchy has expressed much angst over the historic Iran nuclear deal, the administration may not have the leverage to oppose the kingdom's Syria policy, which could risk antagonizing them even further.

When you step back these developments are truly breathtaking. What does it say about the clarity of the strategic thinking behind the current "war on terror" that the perpetrators of 9-11 may morph from enemies into allies? One would think that after decades of blowback from supporting the Mujahidin forefathers of al Qaeda in Afghanistan in the eighties, that our allies and the U.S. foreign policy elite would learn their lesson.

Unfortunately, the willingness to advance goals through a short-sighted military support of unsavory characters still holds firm in Washington. Coupled with a desire to mollify Saudi Arabia's suspicion of the recent diplomatic initiatives in the region, US officials may be acquiescing to the Kingdom's plan to see a Sunni state replace the Alawite regime of Bashar Assad. Considering the disastrous [results](#) of a similar strategy in Libya against Gaddafi in 2011, policy makers should sound the alarm immediately and push back against this obvious recipe for disaster, before it spins out of control. Again.

Via - [Peace Action West - Groundswell Blog](#)

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