

# Obama in Talks with “Rebel” Leader on Escalating Syrian War

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The Obama administration has entered into direct talks with the leader of the political front for Syria’s Western-backed “rebels” on arming them with US surface-to-air missiles, amid fresh confirmation that these forces are dominated by Al Qaeda-linked militias.

Ahmad al-Jarba, the chief of the Syrian Opposition Coalition, met Thursday at the State Department with Secretary of State John Kerry. He is scheduled to meet with President Barack Obama at the White House in the coming days. Meetings are also scheduled at the Pentagon and with members of the US Congress.

The visit is part of a shift toward renewed US escalation of its proxy war in Syria, fueled in no small part by the ongoing confrontation over Ukraine with Russia, a key ally of the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

In conjunction with al-Jarba’s arrival, the State Department announced that Washington is providing another \$27 million in so-called “non-lethal aid” to the “rebels”—bringing the total reported aid thus far to \$287 million—and is granting diplomatic status to missions set up by the Syrian Opposition Coalition in Washington and New York City. Last March, after the breakdown of talks in Geneva between the Western-backed forces and the Assad regime, the Obama administration ordered the shutdown of the Syrian embassy in Washington and Syrian consulates in other US cities.

Ahmad al-Jarba, however, left no doubt that the principal aim of his visit is to obtain new and more powerful weapons to stem the accelerating rout of the anti-Assad militias, which were compelled this week to evacuate Homs. Syria’s third largest city and an industrial center, Homs is strategically decisive because of its control of supply routes from the country’s Mediterranean coast to the capital, Damascus.

In both an interview with the *New York Times* and a speech Wednesday at the US Institute of Peace—a government agency tied to US intelligence services—al-Jarba stressed that the main item on his US agenda is procuring shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles, known as manpads.

He also confirmed that Washington had already supplied Free Syrian Army (FSA) “rebels” with at least 20 TOW anti-tank missiles. According to the *Times*, he claimed that the shipment “had enabled the opposition to demonstrate that it was able to use and maintain control of advanced American weapons.”

Similarly, in his speech at the US Institute of Peace, he declared: “We need efficient weapons in the right hands, the hands of professionals, and we commit to keep them in the

right hands. This is the only way to bring stability.”

But even as al-Jarba and his cohorts were making such claims, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article Thursday citing sources within the Free Syrian Army, reporting that the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, part of the supposedly “moderate” and “secular” FSA, have been operating jointly for the past few weeks with the Al Qaeda-affiliated Al Nusra Front in the southwestern province of Quneitra, near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. It is on this southern front that the US has been most active in training and arming the “rebels.”

“The FSA and Nusra Front are closely cooperating on the front line,” Abu Omar Golani, a media coordinator for the Syrian Revolutionaries Front told the *Journal*. He added that the two factions were coordinating battlefield operations in five joint “military operational rooms” where they plan battles. He assured the US newspaper that the FSA and the Al Qaeda-affiliated Islamists had no intention of carrying out any action against neighboring Israel.

Even more damning was a report in the *National*, a United Arab Emirates daily, that a key commander of the US-backed FSA on the southern front had been captured by Al Nusra, which is vowing to try him for treason. The newspaper said that the incident underscored “the growing power of Al Qaeda on a battlefield in which its influence has long been considered minimal.”

The commander, Col. Ahmed Nehmeh, is a Syrian air force officer who joined the “rebels.” The paper stressed the “humiliation” that the detention represented for the US-backed “moderates,” noting that the FSA had issued a 48-hour ultimatum for the officer’s release, and, when the deadline passed, backed down, calling for “negotiations and conciliation.”

The *National* also reported that Nehmeh was unpopular even within the FSA, and that other officers may have welcomed his capture “in the hope that they can take over his role ... and build up their own client networks through distributing weapons and cash.”

The newspaper concluded, “In taking Col. Nehmeh, Al Nusra has made it clear that inside Syria, even on the more moderate, better organized southern front, it, not foreign intelligence agents, call the shots.”

The “foreign intelligence agents” referred to include principally the CIA and its counterparts from Saudi Arabia and the other reactionary Gulf monarchies. The Obama administration placed the training and arming of the “rebels” on the southern front under the jurisdiction of the CIA, on the pretense that the operation was meant not only to further regime change in Damascus, but also to advance the “war on terrorism” by combating the influence of Al Nusra. This is a fraud and a farce.

If the administration moves ahead with the arming of the FSA with manpads, there is every probability that these weapons will fall into the hands of the Al Qaeda elements and may be used sooner rather than later in the downing of a civilian airliner.

It may do so anyway, however, because of the increasingly desperate position of the Syrian “rebels.” The retreat from Homs, which was brokered by Russia and Iran in return for the release of a group of captured Syrian soldiers, an Iranian woman and some 40 Alawite women and children taken hostage by the Sunni Islamist fighters, represents a strategic

defeat in the US-backed war for regime change.

Combined with a series of truces negotiated with Islamist fighters in the Damascus suburbs, the regime has largely neutralized any immediate threat to its grip on power and defeated the opposition's strategy of encircling and cutting off supplies to the capital.

While fighting continues in the north of the country, where the Islamists blew up a historic building facing the city of Aleppo's 13th century citadel Thursday, much of the combat is between rival factions of the "rebels" for control of territory and loot.

The Obama administration's main aim appears to be to keep the civil war and the horrendous bloodletting in Syria going, in order to prevent the Assad regime from restabilizing the country.

Meanwhile, as part of the Western strategy to demonize Assad and lay the political basis for overthrowing his regime, France has drafted a resolution for the United Nations Security Council to refer the Syrian war to the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

The cynicism of this strategy was made clear by a report in the *New York Times* on the difficulty in "tailoring" this resolution to suit the interests of Washington, which has refused to ratify the Rome Statute establishing the court and rejects its jurisdiction.

In the first place, the French have had to strictly delineate the time frame for the acts to be investigated— after 2011—so that a case involving Syria cannot extend to the crimes carried out in the country by Washington's main ally in the region, Israel. The US wants a guarantee that the Zionist state cannot be called to account for occupying Syria's Golan Heights since 1967 and expelling its population.

Secondly, the resolution specifically exempts "current or former officials or personnel" of any country that has not ratified the Rome Statute, with the exception of Syria. The aim of this clause is to assure Washington that US officials and military personnel cannot be held accountable for war crimes, if and when the US decides to invade Syria to directly prosecute its war for regime change.

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