

Rebranding Al-Qaeda's Jabhat Al Nusra in Syria as "Moderates"

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The CIA backed and armed Syrian rebel group, Hazm brigade disbanded and its members have [defected](#) to Al Qaeda linked Jabhat Al Nusra (JAN) and ISIS. Hazm brigade also left behind a warehouse of US provided weapons, including anti-tank TOW missiles, which JAN has seized. With no one left to arm against the Syrian state but JAN, the US State Department has attempted to rebrand JAN as a non-Al Qaeda moderate force. The next step of the plan is to allow US proxy Qatar to openly arm JAN. However, the audacious campaign has so far been an abysmal failure.

Hazm Brigade Provided Plausible Deniability

The latest defection and disbanding was not the first time that the US backed Hazm brigade had handed over US provided weapons to Al Qaeda, the last incident occurring in [December](#) of 2014. It was previously [asserted](#) that the US administration advertised the 'moderate' Hazm brigade in order to maintain plausible deniability whilst knowing the heavy weapons they provide, such as anti-tank missiles, would eventually end up in the hands of Al Qaeda.

Indeed, former-US ambassador Robert Ford recently [admitted](#) through his twitter account to Syrian journalist Edward Dark, that the US knew the Syrian rebels they were backing were allied to Al Qaeda. With the announcement that Hazm brigade had disbanded, the State Department has lost their cover to aid al Qaeda whilst maintaining plausible deniability.

Rebranding Al Qaeda

NATO media has [acknowledged](#) that JAN is the most [powerful group](#) fighting the Syrian state besides ISIS. JAN also have widespread support amongst all other insurgents groups in Syria. Given the level at which the US has committed itself to an anti-ISIS narrative, they have little left to paint as a moderate force but JAN. Though, the US has launched strikes against JAN in one instance, earning the ire of all Syrian insurgent groups who [protested](#) "We are all JAN". [Suggestions](#) to train a new insurgent group from scratch have been called unrealistic. Hence NATO media has been running a PR campaign for JAN's new found moderation.

The [New York Times](#) suggested that JAN may 'cut ties with Al Qaeda in the hope of receiving more military aid". [Reuters](#) reported that if the group were to lose its Al Qaeda ties that Gulf states could provide more support openly.

"Sources in the group have said it was considering severing its ties to al

Qaeda, a move that could result in more support from Gulf Arab states hostile to both Assad and Islamic State.”

The word of “more” tentatively suggests the New York Times and Reuters acknowledge that Gulf states have already provided some support to Al Qaeda in the past.

[BBC](#) analysis written by Dr. David Roberts, suggested that Qatar funding and arming JAN (Al Nusra Front) may be a good thing. In an article titled “Is Qatar bringing the Nusra Front in from the cold?” he writes,

“Secondly, the Nusra Front has pledged to concentrate its efforts on removing the Bashar al-Assad government, as opposed to attacking the “far enemy” (ie Western states). On this point, the Nusra Front is aligned tightly with Qatar, which also is implacably against the government and fundamentally believes that the situation in Syria will only improve if he is removed....This is why Qatar is hoping to bring the Nusra Front in from the cold. If the state can get the group to eschew its al-Qaeda affiliation and adhere to a broadly moderate Islamist platform, Qatar can officially commence, with Western blessing, the supply of one of the most effective fighting forces in Syria.”

The [IBtimes](#) downplayed JAN’s ties to Al Qaeda, stating:

“Though JAN is al Qaeda’s only branch in Syria, the group often downplays its role in al Qaeda Central’s long-term plan to establish an Islamic “emirate” in favour of marketing itself as a Syria-centric opposition group focused on the revolution and overthrowing Assad.”

Finally, In an [article](#) headlined “Accepting Al Qaeda,” the Council of Foreign Affairs ([CFR](#)) advised that the US must keep ‘Al Qaeda afloat to contain ISIS’. Unlike other articles, the CFR doesn’t bother to suggest that JAN drop their Al Qaeda affiliations, instead suggesting the US should accept them in spite of their Al Qaeda affiliations. This would be the [second](#) time the CFR would recommend the US make friends with Al Qaeda. They had previously labeled the Ahrar Al Sham insurgent group “Al Qaeda worth befriending”. The CFR is considered to be US’s “most influential foreign-policy think tank”. In 2009, Hillary Clinton [welcomed](#) the fact that the CFR had set up an outpost down the street from the State Department, saying “I won’t have as far to go to be told what we should be doing.”

A Difficult Task

It was always going to be a difficult task to convince the American people to support a group they have been constantly told was responsible for the death of thousands of US soldiers and civilians. They were reminded by their own government every year to “never forget 9/11” and their young men were sent to die to avenge the incident, now they are being asked to forget just that.

But the task of rebranding JAN has been fraught with other difficulties, the main being that Al Nusra is not co-operating with the US-Qatari plan. In an angry statement, JAN denied US media reports that they were breaking ties with Al Qaeda. The AFP [wrote](#) that JAN had rejected “any plan to break away [from Al Qaeda] and become a more internationally acceptable rebel force.”

But the AFP falls short of explaining how dropping a label would make JAN more internationally acceptable and no longer a 'terrorist' organisation. When ISIS shed its al Qaeda label, it did not stop ethnically cleansing minorities or beheading Syrian soldiers. Al Qaeda is after all just a label, it is practically an imaginary organisation with practically the only men on the ground being the insurgents of JAN. Al Qaeda is more of an ideological affiliation, rather than an affiliation to a real organisation

The very fact that the NATO run media suggests changing JAN's label would make them moderate, illustrates that the only distinction between the Al Qaeda and those groups NATO media calls moderate, is nothing but a label. They have very little ideological differences and commit equally abhorrent war crimes. Further illustrating this is, the fact that the Hazm brigade fighters found it easy to defect to JAN and ISIS and shows that the 'moderate' fighters had little trouble embracing Al Qaeda's ideology.

Another difficulty is while Jabhat Al Nusra was condemned as a terrorist organisation, NATO run media was allowed to report on their war crimes. It is difficult to run a PR campaign for a group that has claimed responsibility for many [car bombings](#) which targeted civilians. It was also widely reported that Jabhat Al Nusra [kidnapped](#) UN peace keepers and later [taunted](#) them with the heads of murdered Syrian soldiers. Just like ISIS, JAN has been busy [destroying](#) Syria's historical sites, though unlike the case with ISIS it was under-reported across NATO run media.

In 2012, it became increasingly obvious the Syrian state was fighting a sectarian and religiously motivated insurgency that was linked to Al Qaeda. It is possible that the US labeled JAN a terrorist organisation, as it needed a scapegoat to pin all rebel warcrimes on and to with which to set apart other insurgent groups. The policy may have backfired when JAN grew to be the main insurgent group fighting the Syrian state. During this time the US no longer needed JAN to act as the scapegoat as ISIS rose to fill in that role.

Indeed it also required for the US to label at least one insurgent group as a terrorists organisation, in order to pursue a long term objective of fighting a [perpetual war](#) "on terror". However, the time frame of the rise of JAN seems to be inconvenient for the United States. Such a narrative shift was likely meant to occur after the successful overthrow of the Syrian government. Creating terror to overthrow a government and then going back in to fight it, has been the template which was applied to Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. But unlike in Iraq and Libya, the Syrian government remains firmly in place. As a result the US has been forced to pursue two conflicting policies and narratives at once, fighting terror and funding terror.

Apart from perpetual war, the rise of Al Qaeda linked groups better suits other long term US objectives. Such groups are more fundamentally opposed to Hezbollah, Iran and Russia. They are also more likely to pursue a policy of ethnic cleansing which would more easily lead to [balkanisation](#). Finally the advantage of a mostly Al Qaeda force is that it is cheaper to run, as they are funded mostly by Gulf states who launder money through donations to pro-Al Qaeda Wahabi mosques. The US may find it easier to convince Qatar to foot the entire bill for the insurgency, arguing that they can't do so whilst maintaining plausible deniability. It is interesting to note that, some Hazm brigade members [believe](#) the US set them up to fail by not providing them enough resources. Perhaps Hazm brigade were always left in a state weaker than JAN so that JAN would be able to loot the TOW missile arsenal, but perhaps JAN killed the goose that laid the golden egg.

One of the biggest hurdles in the plan to allow Qatar to openly fund JAN arises from the fact the the UN Security Council has already condemned and [sanctioned](#) both JAN and ISIS, unanimously adopting a Russian-drafted resolution. This effectively makes it illegal to fund JAN under international law. But there have already been [accusations](#) of US-ally Qatar sponsoring JAN and Qatar has done little to deny them.

The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamid II, [told](#) CNN's Christiane Amanpour that there are groups that the US considered terrorists in Syria which Qatar does not, avoiding naming JAN outright. UK Prime Minister [David Cameron](#) and [Washington](#) have gone as far as to admit that individuals in Qatar were also bank rolling ISIS, perhaps as a means of blackmailing their Qatari ally in the future. Qatar was able to openly transfer millions to JAN, under the guise of paying ransom for abducted nuns and UN peacekeepers. BBC analyst Dr David Roberts does not question Qatar's ties to JAN but, [referred](#) to the hostage taking as 'JAN helping Qatar release hostages'.

Whilst Qatar has provided funding to JAN in the past, openly arming JAN would allow Qatar to transfer a lot more money and perhaps heavier weaponry through the US. But without first removing JAN off the UN sanctions list it would be too difficult for the UN to ignore. Though there have been set backs to the US-Qatar open arming plan, they may continue trying in the coming weeks. Regardless, funding for JAN and the insurgency is not going to dry up any time soon, with or without plausible deniability.

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