

Syria's "Moderate Terrorists": Neocons Urge Embrace of Al Qaeda

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The latest neocon gambit is to build support for "regime change" in Syria by downplaying the evils of Al Qaeda, rebranding it as some sort of "moderate" terrorist force whose Syrian affiliate is acceptable to Israel and supported by Saudi Arabia. But this audacious argument ignores reality, writes Daniel Lazare.

Just nine days after the fall of the World Trade Center, George W. Bush [announced](#) that he was imposing a radical new policy on virtually the entire globe:

"Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime."

As dramatic as the statement was, just about every phrase was open to question in one form or another. But rather than launching into a long and vigorous debate about the meaning of terrorism or America's right to impose *diktat* on the world at large, congressmen turned their minds off and gave Bush a standing ovation.

The second plane about to crash into the World Trade Center towers in New York City on Sept. 11, 2001.

Today, the same Bush Doctrine is sinking beneath the waves as a growing portion of the punditocracy declares that some forms of terrorism are better than others and that harboring a terrorist may not be so bad if it advances U.S. interests. But once again, the response is not questioning, debate, or even applause, but silence.

The latest evidence of a sea change in establishment thinking is a blog that Ahmed Rashid, a prominent Middle East correspondent, recently published on *The New York Review of Books* website. Entitled "[Why We Need al-Qaeda](#)," it argues that Al Qaeda and its Syrian affiliate, Al Nusra, are evolving in a more moderate direction in growing contrast to its rival, the super-violent Islamic State. So why not use Al Nusra as a counterforce against both Bashar al-Assad and ISIS?

As Rashid puts it: "Unlike ISIS, which demands absolute subjugation of the inhabitants of any territory it conquers (surrender or be executed), al-Nusra is cooperating with other anti-Assad groups and recently joined the 'Army of Conquest' alliance of rebel militias in northern Syria. Moreover, in contrast to ISIS's largely international and non-Syrian fighting force, al-Nusra's fighters are almost wholly Syrian, making them both more reliable and

more committed to Syria's future.

Meanwhile, in interviews with Al Jazeera, al-Nusra leaders have vowed not to attack targets in the West, promoting an ideology that might be called 'nationalist jihadism' rather than global jihad. In recent months, al-Nusra's leaders have toned down the implementation of their own brutal version of Islamic law, while putting on hold their own plans of building a caliphate.

Thus, according to Rashid's viewpoint, Al Nusra is cooperative, patriotic, unthreatening to anyone other than Assad, and in favor of a kinder and gentler form of shari'a as well. Yet, Rashid argues, that while Turkey and the Arab gulf states recognize that change is afoot, the U.S. keeps its eyes resolutely shut:

"With 230,000 killed and 7.6 million people uprooted [in Syria](#) alone, the Arab states want a quick end to the Assad regime and a viable solution for Syria. They know that solution will never come from the weak moderate opposition, and that any lasting peace will require support by the strong and ruthless Islamist groups fighting there."

Gulf States' Favorite

So the gulf states are backing the second most ruthless Islamist group in Syria (Al Qaeda's affiliate) in hopes of offsetting the first most ruthless (ISIS) and making short work of the Baathist regime in Damascus. But as Arab leaders prepare for direct negotiations with Al Nusra, Rashid warns, "the only one not at the table could be the United States."

This is dramatic stuff. After all, Rashid is not taking aim at some minor doctrine, but one that has been a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy since 9/11. Moreover, he's not the only one talking this way. Since Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan flew to Riyadh in early March to meet with Saudi King Salman and discuss ways of [upping support for the Syrian Islamist opposition](#), there has been a veritable boomlet in terms of calls for a rapprochement with Al Qaeda.

Within days of the Riyadh get-together, *Foreign Affairs* went public with an article [arguing](#) that even though "the United States is the closest it has ever been to destroying al Qaeda, its interests would be better served by keeping the terrorist organization afloat." Lina Khatib, director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, [wrote](#) a few weeks later that "while not everyone likes Nusra's ideology, there is a growing sense in the north of Syria that it is the best alternative on the ground - and that ideology is a small price to pay for higher returns."

Charles Lister of the Brookings Institute's Doha Center, [wrote](#) that Al Nusra is undergoing a "moderating shift." Frederic Hof, Obama's former envoy to the Syrian guerrillas and now a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council in Washington, [said](#) the group has become "a real magnet for young Syrian fighters who don't have any particular jihadist or even radical sectarian agenda." They are drawn to Al Nusra, he explained, for two reasons - because it's "well-resourced" and because it "seems to have been willing to fight the regime and not to engage in some of the corrupt activities and warlordism that you would find elsewhere within the panoply of Syrian opposition."

So, Rashid's views are hardly unique. Nonetheless, they're the most explicit and upfront to

date, an indication that support for an alliance with Al Qaeda is on the upswing and that advocates are growing bolder and more self-confident. So how should ordinary people who are not part of the elite foreign-policy discussion respond?

One-Sided Arguments

For one thing, they might notice that such articles are remarkably one-sided and poorly reasoned. Rashid may be “one of Pakistan’s most respected journalists,” as the [BBC](#) puts it, someone whose work has appeared in such publications as the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. Yet shooting holes through his arguments is child’s play.

Take his claim that “al-Nusra’s leaders have toned down the implementation of their own brutal version of Islamic law.” Whatever the difference between Al Nusra and ISIS on this score, it’s less impressive than Rashid lets on.

The Soufan Group, a New York-based security firm headed by a Lebanese-American ex-FBI agent named Ali H. Soufan, notes, for instance, that while Islamic State released a video in January showing its forces stoning an accused adulteress, Al Nusra released one around the same time showing its forces shooting two women for the same alleged offense. Since the victims in either case were killed, the difference, as the Soufan Group noted, was purely “[stylistic](#).”

Rashid claims that Al Nusra is less extreme in its hostility to Shi’ism, in part because it thinks “anti-Shia fanaticism” is backfiring and becoming “an impediment to gaining more territory.” Indeed, Abu Mohammad al-Julani, Al Nusra’s commander-in-chief, told Al Jazeera in a rare interview on May 27 that his forces were willing to welcome Alawites, as Syria’s Shi’ites are known, back into the fold.

“If they drop weapons,” al-Julani [said](#), “disavow Assad, do not send their men to fight for him and return to Islam, then they are our brothers.” But when he described Alawism as a sect that has “moved outside the religion of God and of Islam,” the meaning became clear: Alawite must either convert or die.

Whether this makes Al Nusra less genocidal than ISIS is open to debate. According to the pro-rebel Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, meanwhile, Al Nusra recently [massacred](#) more than 20 Druze villagers in northwestern Syria – reportedly after a local commander [denounced](#) them as *kuffar*, or infidels, while al-Julani, in his Al Jazeera interview, specified that Christians must pay the *jizya*, a special head tax imposed by Islamic law, as well – a stipulation Syria’s ten-percent Christian minority is not likely to find very reassuring.

Ordinary people viewing this from afar might notice that the government that al-Julani is seeking to overthrow is officially secular and non-discriminatory and that even Obama has conceded that it has “[protected the Christians in Syria](#),” as he told a Syrian Christian delegation last September. They might also notice that Rashid’s article is in other respects highly revealing, although not in ways he cares to admit.

For instance, Rashid writes that U.S. policy in the Middle East is beset by “growing contradictions.” This is obviously correct. But the problem is not that Washington refuses to face facts about Al Nusra’s alleged moderating trend, but that the U.S. is attempting to hammer out an accord with Iran while struggling to preserve its alliance with Israel and the

Arab gulf states, all of whom regard Iran as public enemy number one.

Obama's Fence Straddling

The effort has led to monumental fence straddling. While entering into talks with Iran, the Obama administration has given the go-ahead to Saudi Arabia's two-month-old assault on Iranian-allied forces in Yemen while turning a blind eye to growing Turkish and Saudi support for anti-Iranian terrorists in Syria.

While paying lip service to the Bush Doctrine that he who harbors a terrorist is as bad as a terrorist, the Obama administration made no objection when the Saudis and Turks [donated U.S.-made TOW missiles to Al Nusra-led forces](#) in northern Syria or [when the Saudi bombing campaign allowed Al Qaeda to expand in Yemen](#).

It's a mixed-up policy that has people in the Middle East shaking their heads. Yet Rashid adds to the confusion by misrepresenting the Saudi role. He writes, for instance, that the Arab States are swinging behind Al Nusra because they "want a quick end to the Assad regime and a viable solution for Syria," when, in fact, Saudi Wahhabists have sought from the start to impose a government much like their own, as a report by U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency [observed](#) back in August 2012.

Rather than "viable," such a government would be precisely the opposite for a highly variegated society like Syria with its large Christian, Shi'ite, and Druze minorities fearful of Sunni fundamentalist domination - yet the gulf states, backed by the U.S., have pushed on regardless.

On the issue of Al Qaeda's brutal intolerance, Rashid adds, "For Arab leaders, determining whether al-Qaeda has really changed will depend on the group's long-term attitude toward Shias," suggesting that the gulf states are seeking a fairer outcome for Syria's Alawites.

Saudi Intolerance

But this is misleading as well since Saudi attitudes toward the kingdom's own 15-percent Shi'ite minority are deeply oppressive and seem to be getting worse.

According to the Cambridge scholar [Toby Matthiesen](#), for example, Saudi Shi'ites are barred from the army and the National Guard as well as the top rungs of the government. State-mandated schoolbooks denounce them as "rejectionists," while, according to the independent scholar [Mai Yamani](#), they cannot testify in court or marry a Sunni and must put up with abuse from Wahhabist clerics who regularly preach that killing a Shi'ite merits a greater heavenly reward than killing a Christian or a Jew.

Since Salman's accession in late January, there is no sign of a softening. Indeed, by bombing Yemen's Shi'ite Houthi rebels and stepping up support for fanatically anti-Shi'ite rebels in Syria, Salman gives every indication of intensifying his anti-Shi'ite crusade and taking it abroad.

Neocons pushing for an explicit alliance with Al Nusra are thus attempting to plunge the U.S. ever more deeply into a growing sectarian war. Ordinary people might also notice that such "experts" expound their views from cushy posts financed by Qatar (the case with [Brookings' Doha Center](#)) or by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain (the case with the [Atlantic Council](#)).

Yet Congress doesn't care about such conflicts of interest and the White House is too intimidated to speak out, while the American people at large are not consulted. Questioning and debate are more imperative than ever, yet they are as absent as they were back in 2001.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Climbing into Bed with Al-Qaeda.](#)"]

Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace).

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