

US “Military Aid” to Syrian Opposition Goes to Al Qaeda

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American Intelligence officials are acknowledging that the bulk of the weapons flowing into Syria for the US-backed war to topple the regime of Bashar al-Assad are going into the hands of Al Qaeda and like-minded Islamist militias.

A lead article appearing in the *New York Times* Monday confirms the mounting reports from the region that jihadist elements are playing an increasingly prominent role in what has become a sectarian civil war in Syria.

“Most of the arms shipped at the behest of Saudi Arabia and Qatar to supply Syrian rebel groups fighting the government of Bashar al-Assad are going to hard-line Islamic jihadists, and not the more secular opposition groups that the West wants to bolster, according to American officials and Middle Eastern diplomats,” the *Times* reports.

The article reflects the growing disquiet within US ruling circles over the Obama administration’s strategy in Syria and, more broadly, in the Middle East, and adds fuel to the deepening foreign policy crisis confronting the Democratic president with just three weeks to go until the election.

In the distorted public debate between Democrats and Republicans, this crisis has centered around the September 11 attack on the US consulate and a secret CIA headquarters in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi that claimed the lives of the US ambassador, J. Christopher Stevens, and three other Americans.

Republicans have waged an increasingly aggressive public campaign, indicting the Obama administration for failure to protect the American personnel. They have also accused the White House of attempting to cover up the nature of the incident, which the administration first presented as a spontaneous demonstration against an anti-Islamic video, before classifying it as a terrorist attack.

In Sunday television interviews, Republicans pressed this line of attack while Democrats countered that it was a political “witch-hunt” and that the initial description of the attack was based on available intelligence at the time.

Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, appearing on the NBC news program “Face the Nation,” argued that the description of the fatal attack in Benghazi as a spontaneous event was politically motivated. The Obama reelection campaign, he charged, is “trying to sell a narrative that... Al Qaeda has been dismantled—and to admit that our embassy was attacked by Al Qaeda operatives undercuts that narrative.”

What is involved, however, is not merely the disruption of an election campaign “narrative.” The events in Benghazi blew apart the entire US policy both in Libya and Syria, opening up a tremendous crisis for American foreign policy in the region.

The forces that attacked the US consulate and CIA outpost in Benghazi were not merely affiliates of Al Qaeda, they were the same forces that Washington and its allies had armed, trained and supported with an intense air war in the campaign for regime-change that ended with the brutal murder of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi one year ago.

Ambassador Stevens, who was sent into Benghazi at the outset of this seven-month war, was the point man in forging this cynical alliance between US imperialism and forces and individuals that Washington had previously branded as “terrorists” and subjected to torture, rendition and imprisonment at Guantanamo.

The relationship between Washington and these forces echoed a similar alliance forged in the 1980s with the mujahideen and Al Qaeda itself in the war fostered by the CIA in Afghanistan to overthrow a government aligned with Moscow and to bloody the Soviet army.

Just as in Afghanistan, the Libyan arrangement has led to “blowback” for US imperialism. Having utilized the Islamist militias to follow up NATO air strikes and hunt down Gaddafi, once this goal was achieved Washington sought to push them aside and install trusted assets of the CIA and the big oil companies as the country’s rulers. Resenting being cut out of the spoils of war, and still heavily armed, the Islamist forces struck back, organizing the assassination of Stevens.

The Obama administration cannot publicly explain this turn of events without exposing the so-called “war on terror,” the ideological centerpiece of American foreign policy for over a decade, as a fraud, along with the supposedly “humanitarian” and “democratic” motives for the US intervention in Libya.

Moreover, it is utilizing the same forces to pursue its quest for regime-change in Syria, which is, in turn, aimed at weakening Iran and preparing for a US-Israeli war against that country. And, as the *Times* article indicates, an even more spectacular form of “blowback” is being prepared.

The *Times* quotes an unnamed American official familiar with US intelligence findings as saying, “The opposition groups that are receiving most of the lethal aid are exactly the ones we don’t want to have it.”

The article points to the role of the Sunni monarchies in Qatar and Saudi Arabia in funneling weaponry to hard-line Islamists, based upon their own religious sectarian agendas in the region, which are aimed at curtailing the influence of Shia-dominated Iran.

It attributes the failure of CIA personnel deployed at the Turkish-Syrian border in attempting to vet groups receiving weapons to a “lack of good intelligence about many rebel figures and factions.”

What the article fails to spell out, however, is precisely what “secular opposition groups” exist in Syria that the US wants to arm. The Turkish-based leaderships of the National Syrian Council and the Free Syrian Army have little influence and are largely discredited inside Syria.

A report issued by the International Crisis Group (ICG) on October 12 entitled “Tentative Jihad, Syria’s Fundamentalist Opposition” suggests that the so-called “secularist” armed opposition does not exist. It notes that, “the presence of a powerful Salafi strand among Syria’s rebels has become irrefutable,” along with a “slide toward ever-more radical and confessional discourse and... brutal tactics.”

It cites the increasingly prominent role played by groups like Jabhat al-Nusra [the Support Front] and Kata’ib Ahrar al-Sham [the Freemen of Syria Battalions],” both of which unambiguously embraced the language of jihad and called for replacing the regime with an Islamic state based on Salafi principles.”

Finally, it attributes the rising influence of these elements to “the lack of moderate, effective clerical and political leadership,” under conditions in which more moderate Sunni elements have opposed the so-called “rebels.”

“Overall, the absence of an assertive, pragmatic leadership, coupled with spiraling, at times deeply sectarian, violence inevitably played into more hard-line hands,” the ICG report concludes.

Increasingly, elements within the US ruling establishment are citing the growing influence of the Islamist militias in Syria as a justification for a direct US military intervention. Representative of this view is Jackson Diehl, the *Washington Post’s* chief foreign affairs editor and a prominent advocate of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. In an October 14 column, Diehl describes the situation in Syria as “an emerging strategic disaster” attributable to Obama’s “self-defeating caution in asserting American power.”

“Fixed on his campaign slogan that ‘the tide of war is receding’ in the Middle East,” Diehl writes, “Obama claims that intervention would only make the conflict worse—and then watches as it spreads to NATO ally Turkey and draws in hundreds of al-Qaeda fighters.”

Chiding Romney and the Republicans for focusing on the terrorist attack in Benghazi, Diehl notes that this is easier than asking “war-weary Americans” to contemplate yet another war of aggression. Nonetheless, he suggests, once the election is over, such a war will be on the agenda, no matter who sits in the White House.

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