

War in Syria Video: Saudi Arabia Supporting a Hardline Coalition of Islamist Rebels, on Behalf of Washington

Foreign Policy Diary: The Syrian War

By [South Front](#)

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Last month Islamist insurgents including al Qaeda's wing in Syria, Nusra Front, captured the town of Jisr al-Shughour in Syria's Idlib province, edging closer to the government-held heartland of Latakia along the coast. In turn, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said army setbacks were part of normal warfare. Battles have been raging around the hospital on the southwestern outskirts of Jisr al-Shughour, where army forces and allied fighters have been holed up since the extremists' offensive began. Government forces have endured a series of setbacks on the battlefield and Islamist fighters have edged closer to Assad's stronghold in the coastal areas.

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Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is actively supporting a hardline coalition of Islamist rebels against Bashar al-Assad's regime that includes al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria. The country is focusing its backing on the combined Jaish al-Fatah, or the Army of Conquest, a command structure for the jihadist groups in Syria that includes Jabhat al-Nusra, an extremist rival to Islamic State which shares many of its aspirations for a fundamentalist caliphate. It threatens to trump Washington's own attempt to train so-called "pro-Western opposition fighters", announced by President Barack Obama a year ago but finally launched only last week. The number of fighters involved is small and, crucially, the State Department insists that they would take the field against Isis and not against the regime. However, official Washington's attitude has to be examined apart from its real interests. Many refer arising of terroristic entities such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State with US's activity in the region.

The Army of Conquest is the coalition, whose formation was announced in March, comprises a range of mostly jihadist and Islamist groups including Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, Jund al-Aqsa and the powerful Islamist Ahrar al-Sham. Its command center is established in Idlib, northern Syria. Turkish officials admit giving logistical and intelligence support to the command headquarters. Although they deny giving direct help to al-Nusra, they acknowledge that the group would be beneficiaries. Turkish officials claim that bolstering Ahrar al-Sham will weaken the influence of al-Nusra. Material support - arms and money - have been coming from the Saudis, say rebels and officials.

Syria will face greater instability and control by extremist groups as soon as Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's momentum in fighting off rebel groups is decreased. U.S. security officials attribute the gains of militants in part to their wide battleground experience and ability to use advanced tactics. There are also marks that extremists have become more coherent in their organization. The U.S. is continuing to argue that it supports only moderate rebels. Meanwhile, U.S. officials pointed out that they still had trouble identifying moderate partners, while al Qaeda affiliate al Nusra and Islamic State were tried to take advantage of any cracks in the government's control. In account of these facts, question arises. If US has troubles with identifying 'moderate rebel groups' and its training of "pro-Western opposition fighters" is failed, which entities is U.S. supporting now?

The Foreign Minister of Russia Sergei Lavrov met his U.S. counterpart John Kerry, on Tuesday, in the Russian city of Sochi. Addressing the media after the talks, both diplomats stressed that they were on common ground with regards to many issues, including the situation in Syria and the threat of Islamic State terrorists in the region, as well as the Iranian nuclear deal. They also discussed the developing conflict in Yemen. The Russian Ambassador to the United States Sergei Kislyak added that the discussion between the ministers and President Putin will help define priorities and outline a future course in the relations between the two countries.

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