

US-backed opposition in Syria erupts into internal conflict

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Rival factions of the US-backed groups fighting the Assad regime in Syria have engaged in a series of ambushes and assassinations that demonstrate the reactionary and antidemocratic character of the whole US campaign for “regime change.”

The spark for the outbreak of fighting was the assassination Thursday of a senior commander of the Free Syrian Army, Kamal Hamami, who was shot to death in the town of Salma, in Latakia province in northwestern Syria. The murder was at the hands of an al-Qaeda-affiliated group, Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). It came after a dispute between Hamami and the local Islamic State leader, Abu Ayman.

Press accounts said that Abu Ayman and other ISIS militants denounced the FSA as “infidels,” criticizing them for signing a declaration of religious toleration toward Christian and Alawite minorities. Islamist groups like ISIS and the al-Nusra Front, which have received substantial funding from US allies like Qatar, regularly target non-Sunnis, as well as Sunnis who practice a less rigid form of Islam.

There may have been a conflict over money as well, since the two commanders reportedly differed over plans to attack a Syrian government checkpoint on the Syrian-Turkish border. Besides their strategic importance, border crossings are a lucrative source of revenue, as both refugees fleeing the civil war and shipments of goods across the border can be subject to rebel “taxation”—i.e., extortion and theft.

The Canadian network CTV reported, “Each group is also trying to set up governing structures over the territory in the north the opposition has controlled for a year and take a cut of money from goods being smuggled into Syria over the border with Turkey.”

The incident was the second such attack in the Latakia area. A week before, fighting between ISIS and

FSA gunmen left 10 people killed and dozens injured, although press accounts were contradictory as to which group initiated the fighting and what the outcome was.

The July 11 murder of Hamami was a far more high-profile matter, since he was one of 30 members of the Supreme Military Council, the top coordinating body of the FSA. Open warfare broke out in Aleppo two days later, with heavy fighting in Bustan al-Qasr in the southeast section of Syria’s largest city.

The FSA has controlled much of the east side of Aleppo for the past year, but according to press reports, Islamists seized control of a checkpoint for traffic going to the west side of the city, where forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad hold sway.

According to a Reuters report July 11, the “rebel” forces in control of the checkpoint at Bustan al-Qasr violently suppressed a civilian protest against the blockade that was preventing food and medicine from reaching the government-held areas of the city.

A video posted on the Internet showed a sign posted by rebels at the Bustan al-Qasr checkpoint: “Food, medicine, oil, babies’ products, milk, vegetables, meat, bread: completely forbidden.”

Residents were thus unable to send vitally needed supplies to their own family members and friends if they lived on the other side of the murky battle line that divides the city. The “rebels” fired into the air to disperse the protest, which included chants of “the people want an end to the blockade,” Reuters said.

This report is a rarity in the Western press: an honest depiction of the relationship between the US-backed forces and the population of Syria. Far from acting as “freedom fighters,” the rebel forces seek to starve those still living under Assad’s rule, while threatening violence against those who find themselves living in the “liberated” zones.

Also on Saturday, gunmen from ISIS were said to have attacked the FSA's headquarters in the northwestern province of Idlib.

The FSA has seized on the incidents as an argument for stepped-up weapons shipments from the United States and other imperialist powers, citing the threat of al-Qaeda-linked groups. Louay al-Mokdad, the FSA's media coordinator, was quoted saying of the Islamists, "They have a plan to kill the FSA leaders." He added, "We don't want a side war. We don't want any battle with them. But if they spill our people's blood, which is what they are doing, we will have to fight."

The British newspaper *Daily Telegraph* reported that in response to the Hamami killing, the FSA would launch a revenge attack on the Islamists. "The Free Syrian Army are preparing a big attack on the al-Qaeda group in Latakia province in revenge for the commander's death," a local activist told the newspaper. "There are large numbers of foreign extremists. You can't deal with them freely. The FSA will give them an ultimatum; leave or we will fight you."

An unidentified "senior commander" of the FSA told Reuters Friday, "We will not let them get away with it, because they want to target us. We are going to wipe the floor with them."

An additional factor in the widening bloodshed in Syria is the intervention of the state of Israel. US and British sources reported Sunday that Israeli submarines had carried out an attack July 5 on a government arms depot in the port city of Latakia using cruise missiles.

The Israeli attack was "closely coordinated with the United States," according to the *Jerusalem Post*, and targeted a stockpile of 50 Russian-made Yakhont P-800 anti-ship missiles, which are an effective weapon against Israeli naval gunboats. It was the fourth such Israeli attack on Syrian military assets since the beginning of the year.

The US-backed Syrian groups have expanded their war into Lebanon, with the bombing July 9 of a supermarket in the southern suburbs of Beirut, a largely Shiite area that is the home of many leaders of Hezbollah, the Shiite political party and militia that is allied with Assad. Nearly two dozen people were wounded in the bombing, for which a Syrian group called Brigade 313-Special Missions claimed responsibility.



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