

New York Times mourns death of Al Qaeda-linked Syrian opposition fighter

Alex Lantier

22 November 2013

On Monday, the *New York Times* published an article marking the death of Abdulkader al-Saleh, the leader of the Tawhid (“Monotheism”) Sunni Islamist opposition militia in Syria.

The article, titled “Death of Pragmatic Leader Further Muddles Syrian Rebellion,” exemplifies the Orwellian character of the US media and its support for the war in Syria. It does not even attempt to reconcile the *Times*’ long-time support for US “war on terror” propaganda with its sympathetic treatment of a man who, by its own account, worked with Al Qaeda and committed war crimes while a key US ally and source for the *Times*.

Examining the *Times* piece critically, what emerges is a devastating picture of how the US media embedded itself in a layer of Al Qaeda allies, falsely promoting a bloody US-backed proxy war in Syria fought by far-right Islamist forces as a “democratic” uprising.

The Tawhid militia interested the *Times* largely because Saleh helped them promote this lie: he worked with US media to project a secular image, while also working with Al Qaeda forces that provided the hard core of the opposition’s fighting power. The *Times* writes, “He managed to gather ragtag local militias into the Tawhid Brigades, for a time one of the most organized and effective rebel battle groups, and to bridge the gap between relatively secular army deserters and Islamist fighters.”

Such attempts to characterize fighters like Saleh as a secular or a moderate were false, however. Saleh, well aware of the leading role of Al Qaeda-linked forces in the US-backed opposition, oriented himself to Al Qaeda while maintaining his ties to the *Times*.

This underscores the fraud perpetrated by the bourgeois media and pseudo-left parties such as the International Socialist Organization in the United States

or the New Anti-capitalist Party in France in their presentation of the US proxy war in Syria. They absurdly insisted that the opposition was a democratic movement, in which reactionary and anti-democratic Al Qaeda forces were somehow active but only in an incidental fashion. In fact, the Syrian opposition was a reactionary, US-backed operation in which Al Qaeda played the central role.

According to the *Times*, Saleh “had a prescient view of the conflict: a Syrian insurgency with nowhere else to turn, he said nearly a year ago, would tilt towards foreign fighters and Al Qaeda. By the time a government airstrike caught him in northern Syria last week, even some of his most fervent admirers believed he had become, in some ways, part of that tilt.”

Saleh increasingly worked with some Al Qaeda forces and tried to limit Tawhid’s conflicts with others, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The *Times* writes, “He aligned openly with the Nusra Front, a Qaeda-linked group, even as he maintained ties with the Western-backed Free Syrian Army, saying he was a moderate Islamist and a pragmatist.”

The *Times* cultivated him as a source, nevertheless, and British defense consultancy IHS Jane’s said Tawhid had been identified as a valuable “middle-ground” player in the US-backed Free Syrian Army.

The *Times* writes, “He spoke often, in meetings over the past year with *New York Times* reporters who also spent time with Tawhid, of Syrian hospitality and commitment to an open, pluralistic Syria. But he ultimately made accommodations with ISIS that, to some of his allies, were at best disappointing and at worst ugly. Though he had welcomed journalists and aid workers, when Islamist groups began kidnapping them, even holding hostages at a compound he shared with ISIS in Aleppo, he made no public moves to stop

it.”

While Saleh’s alignment on Al Qaeda reflected Tawhid’s own far-right Islamist politics, it also reflected Al Qaeda’s rising weight in the US-backed Sunni opposition, as these forces lost whatever limited support they had had among Syrian Sunnis. According to the *Times*, “when [Saleh] died Thursday of wounds from an airstrike in Aleppo, he and Tawhid were months into a slow decline from the peak of their influence.”

The *Times* explains, “Tawhid spearheaded the rebel invasion of Aleppo in 2012, widely seen as a mistake and a blow to popular support because it forced the city into battles that destroyed many revered historical sites. *Times* journalists witnessed Tawhid fighters using a prisoner as an unwitting suicide bomber. The group’s fighters were accused of looting and of executing prisoners, though, by the dismal standards that came to prevail, they remained more respected than many other groups.”

The *Times* here downplays the devastation wrought by Tawhid and its allies in Aleppo, where they funded themselves by looting and scrapping the city’s factories and selling off its supplies of grain and medicine. Aleppo was the center of Syria’s substantial domestic pharmaceutical industry, and this had a disastrous effect on public health. Amid shortages of many life-saving medicines and vaccines, Syria now faces its first polio epidemic in modern times.

Above all, however, the *Times* is covering up the role of Western governments and media outlets—including the *Times* itself—which enthusiastically backed Tawhid’s offensive against Aleppo to further the imperialist powers’ criminal war plans against Syria.

After the Aleppo offensive began in August 2012, the French government recognized the opposition as Syria’s government, and Obama announced a “red line,” i.e. that the US would react to chemical weapons use in Syria by declaring war on Syria. This led to repeated poison gas attacks by the Syrian opposition, in an attempt to trigger a US war on Syria to support them.

The *Times*’ admission that Tawhid’s influence was rapidly collapsing underscores the calculations behind Washington’s latest attempt to start a war with Syria, after opposition forces staged a gas attack in Ghouta this September. With the population turning ever more

hostile to the US-backed opposition, and Al Qaeda gaining strength within it, Washington and its allies clearly felt this was their last chance to stage a wider intervention.

The bourgeois media, including the *New York Times* was recruited to promote Tawhid’s Aleppo offensive and the broader US provocations against Syria. *Times* journalist C.J. Chivers, a co-author of Monday’s article, prepared a sympathetic feature article and video, titled “The Lions of Tawhid,” promoting the terror bombings with which Tawhid began its Aleppo offensive.

While the *Times* today blandly writes that its journalists “witnessed Tawhid fighters using a prisoner as an unwitting suicide bomber,” it is silent on the fact that this was an operation that Chivers promoted in his video. Chivers and the *Times* only distanced themselves from Tawhid’s actions after critics of Chivers’ video pointed out that they constituted a war crime.

The video, narrated by Chivers, reflects the broader integration of the *Times* into the criminal forces comprising the US-backed Syrian opposition.

To posthumously praise Saleh, an Al Qaeda-linked operative, the *Times* turns to leaders of the North Storm militia—a militia active north of Aleppo that bases its revenue on smuggling and kidnapping—to certify that Saleh was a “great man.”



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact