US suspends military aid to its Syrian proxies

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The United States and Britain have suspended military aid to the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army—the proxy force through which they have been arming the imperialist-sponsored insurgency to overthrow the Syrian government of Bashir al-Assad.

The suspension came after the Free Syrian Army (FSA) lost control of an enclave along the Turkish border to Saudi-backed Islamist insurgents with whom the FSA had hitherto been closely allied.

On December 6, fighters from the Islamic Front—a newly formed alliance of Salafist and other Sunni fundamentalist militia—overran FSA installations in the border town of Atmeh, including its military headquarters for northern Syria and several warehouses of military equipment. The equipment is said to have included tanks and US- and British-supplied weapons, pick-up trucks and communications equipment.

The Islamic Front also took control of the FSA checkpoint at the Bab al-Hawa Border Crossing into Turkey.

If press reports are to be believed, there were only minimal casualties as the FSA fighters surrendered or fled in the face of the Islamic Front's superior forces. The FSA's supreme commander, General Salim Idris, himself fled across the border to Turkey and from there to Qatar.

The FSA had welcomed the Islamic Front fighters into their military installations to assist them in repelling a rumored attack by the Al Qaeda-aligned ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). Instead, the Front seized the installations.

Coming after a series of military reversals and the defection of many of its fighters in north-eastern Syria to Al Qaeda-aligned militias, the humiliating debacle the FSA suffered in Atmeh has clearly shaken the confidence of its sponsors in Washington, London and Paris as to its continued viability. While the FSA has played an ever-diminishing battlefield role, it and the US-organized political grouping with which it is aligned, the Syrian National Council, have been pivotal to the US and European Unions' cynical efforts to provide their drive for regime change in Damascus with a "moderate" public visage. And Washington and its European allies have sought to bolster the FSA, by making it their conduit for the provisioning of weaponry and military equipment to the Islamist militias.

The FSA debacle comes at a time when the Obama administration, the US political elite, and the military-intelligence community are bitterly divided over US imperialism's Syria policy.

Lacking popular support, the US- and Saudi-instigated insurgency has become bogged down, and ever-more dependent on Sunni Islamists, including thousands of foreign fighters, whose vicious sectarian politics and atrocities have only served to further discredit the insurgency.

While failing to unseat Assad, the insurgency has razed much of Syria, killed more than a hundred thousand, forced seven million from their homes, fanned Shia-Sunni tensions across the Middle East and enabled Al Qaeda and its allies to carve out a sizeable enclave in northern and eastern Syria.

The US has been more than willing to ally with Al Qaeda in the past. Indeed it welcomed their role in the campaign to overthrow Assad, just as it had used them as proxies in the NATO war on Libya. But in Washington there are growing fears that Al Qaeda has been allowed too much latitude and that the spread of its influence from Syria into Iraq could blow up the fragile communal-political structures the US established there at the conclusion of its bloody 2007-8 military surge.

In recent weeks there have been numerous reports suggesting that the US and its allies are contemplating

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action against Al Qaeda in Syria and Iraq, even as they seek to woo other Islamist militias in Syria with the aim of maintaining the military pressure on the Assad regime.

Further light on the divisions within the Obama administration and US elite was shed by this week's article by Seymour Hersh, that exposed as a pack of lies the pretext the administration advanced in late August and early September for preparing an imminent military strike on Syria. Based on leaks from within the national security apparatus, Hersh revealed that not only did the US have no proof the Assad regime had launched a sarin gas attack last August 21, it suppressed the fact that it knew full well that at least one Al Qaeda aligned group, the Al Nusra Front, had access to sarin gas in bulk.

At the eleventh hour, the Obama administration drew back from launching a US war on Syria and pivoted into public negotiations with Iran, Syria's principal regional ally and itself a major target of the US-sponsored Islamist-spearheaded war in Syria.

With the Iranian regime buckling under crippling US-EU economic sanctions, Washington calculates that its can harness Tehran to its strategic interests, thereby freeing up political and military resources to confront its more powerful rivals, Russia and China.

Iran's bourgeois regime, for its part, has signaled its readiness to accommodate to the US, proclaiming its eagerness to give US and EU transnationals privileged access to Iran's oil and natural gas resources and to assist the US in stabilizing the Middle East, from Afghanistan to Lebanon.

Washington is now demanding Tehran join it at next month's US-Russian-sponsored conference on a "political settlement" of the Syrian war in pressuring the Assad regime into surrendering power to a "transitional government" in which the imperialist-backed "rebels" would have at least half the seats. At the same time it is seeking to keep the military pressure on Damascus.

Prior to last week's events at Atmeh, Obama administration officials had been seeking to persuade the Islamic Front, many of whose constituent elements have openly worked with the Al Qaeda-aligned Al Nusra Front, to send representatives to the international conference.

The Obama administration has responded to the Front's attack on its FSA proxies by signaling it wants to keep its channels with Front open. State Department spokeswoman Jan Psaki said Washington was "obviously concerned" about the events in Atmeh. But "we're not prepared at this point to make a broad statement about what it means and what the long-term impact will be."

The FSA for its part is eager to renew close collaboration with the Islamic Front. Louay al-Mokdad, a spokesman for the FSA's Supreme Military Council, dismissed the FSA-Front confrontation as "a misunderstanding between brothers." Continued al-Mokdad, "We are open to everyone. It's time to be united against the Syrian regime."

To what extent the Islamic Front will be willing to resume cooperation with the FSA remains an open question, even if it accedes to the Front's demands that it be accorded a substantial share of control within the Supreme Military Council. At its formation on November 22, the Front repudiated the Syrian National Council and affirmed its objective of a Sunni-dominated Syria subject to Sharia law.

Moreover, its formation was clearly backed if not orchestrated by Saudi Arabia. The Saudi monarchy has demonstrably opposed Washington's overtures to Tehran, for fear it will lose strategic influence to Iran, and it has accused the Obama administration of backing away from the campaign for regime change in Damascus.

Washington and its allies have carried out a monstrous crime in Syria, organizing and arming the most reactionary forces so as to remove a regime viewed as an obstacle to unbridled US domination of the world's most important oil-exporting region. In this they have been aided and abetted by the pseudo-left, especially such organizations as the British Socialist Workers Party, the French New Anti-Capitalist Party and the US International Socialist Organization (ISO), which have spouted imperialist propaganda, dressing up the US-Saudi-fomented Sunni Islamist insurgency as a "revolution."

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