

US-Al Qaeda offensive against Syrian regime

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In a series of battles in which a group linked to Al Qaeda has fought alongside a group armed and backed by the United States, rebel forces have made significant gains against Syrian Army troops loyal to President Bashar al-Assad, taking control of most of the critical northwestern province of Idlib.

With the fall of city of Jisr al-Shughur Saturday, the remaining government forces in the province are cut off and surrounded, and can only be resupplied by air. Rebel forces captured the provincial capital, the city of Idlib, on March 28, the second of Syria's 14 provincial capitals to be lost to the Assad regime.

Idlib province occupies a critical strategic position, separating the coastal provinces of Latakia and Tartus, where Assad has a strong political base among the predominately Alawite population (a branch of Shiite Islam), from Aleppo, the country's largest city and one of the bloodiest battlegrounds of the four-year civil war. According to press reports, rebel forces were only five miles east of the nearest Alawite villages in Latakia province.

Syrian government media reported the fall of Jisr al-Shughur Saturday, and a nearby military base at Qarmed the following day. The government blamed outside powers, including Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United States, with the state news agency SANA saying that its forces were "facing the terrorist groups flowing in huge numbers through the Turkish border."

That this claim is not mere propaganda was confirmed by numerous reports in the American and European press, generally hostile to Assad, describing the alliance of Islamists and US-backed "rebels" in the struggle in Idlib province.

The headline of the McClatchy News Service report on the fall of Jisr al-Shughur left nothing to the imagination: "U.S.-backed rebels team with Islamists to capture strategic Syrian city."

"The latest rebel victory came surprisingly quickly, apparently aided by US-supplied TOW anti-tank missiles," McClatchy reported, adding, "accounts of the fighting made clear that US-supplied rebel groups had coordinated to some degree with Nusra, which US officials declared a terrorist organization more than two years ago."

This article cited conflicting claims by "moderate" and Islamist groups about which had played a greater role in the capture of the city. McClatchy noted, "The battle itself was announced by the Fateh Army, an umbrella group that Ahrar al Sham [another Islamist group] and other groups established on March 24, just four days before they and the Nusra Front seized the city of Idlib."

The rebel-linked television station Orient News reportedly showed video of rebel fighters in the central square of Jisr al-Shughur, raising the black flag that has long been the symbol of Al Qaeda and its affiliated groups. Photographs also appeared of "rebel" trucks bearing poster-sized photos of Osama bin Laden.

The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* reported many of the same facts—the fall of Jisr al-Shughur and nearby bases to the offensive of a rebel alliance—but sought to downplay the link between US-backed and Al Qaeda forces, with the *Times* publishing its article under the headline, "Islamists Seize Control of Syrian City in Northwest."

McClatchy, citing many local eyewitnesses, described an active fighting alliance between Free Syrian Army forces armed with TOW missiles, destroying nearly a dozen Syrian Army tanks, and Al-Nusra suicide bombers who attacked concentrations of soldiers.

The *Times* sought to conceal these connections, suggesting that the TOW missiles had fallen into the wrong hands. By its account, "Last year, the United States provided a small number of TOW antitank

missiles to some rebel groups. But those groups were largely routed or co-opted by the Nusra Front, further complicating what was already a murky battlefield that has left American officials wary of providing more robust aid to insurgents.”

The *Post* concentrated on the political benefits of the offensive from the standpoint of the US State Department, suggesting that the military setbacks had dealt a severe blow to the morale of Assad supporters in both Aleppo and the capital city, Damascus. Its account carried the headline, “Assad’s hold on power looks shakier than ever as rebels advance in Syria.”

The *Post* also glossed over the ties between the US-backed groups and Al Qaeda, writing, “The result has been an unexpectedly cohesive rebel coalition called the Army of Conquest that is made up of al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, an assortment of mostly Islamist brigades and a small number of more moderate battalions.”

The Idlib offensive demonstrates that the claims of successive US governments to be waging a “war on terror” are propaganda lies. Al Qaeda has its origins in the CIA-organized guerrilla warfare in Afghanistan against the Soviet Army and the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. Osama bin Laden was one of the reactionary anticommunist *mujaheddin* mobilized for the Afghan struggle along with thousands of other Islamists from throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Bin Laden broke with his US allies over the influx of American troops into Saudi Arabia during the 1990-91 Gulf War, targeting US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and a US Navy warship near Yemen, and, of course, staging the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

But Al Qaeda forces were later mobilized by the CIA in support of the 2011 US-NATO war against Libya, with many of these fighters then transported to Syria for the fight against Assad. Similarly, Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula, supposedly the most dangerous branch of Al Qaeda in terms of mounting attacks on the United States itself, has become a de facto ally in the US-backed Saudi war against the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

In the Syrian civil war, the relationship between Al Qaeda and US imperialism has been even more complicated. The Al-Nusra Front was formed as the Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda, as part of the mobilization

of Islamists who comprise the main fighting force against the Assad regime. Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged in competition with Al-Nusra and publicly broke with Al Qaeda, in pursuit of territorial objectives in both countries.

Obama launched airstrikes last summer against ISIS in both Iraq and Syria, after the group seized control of Iraq’s second-largest city, Mosul, and staggered the US puppet regime in Baghdad. Since Al-Nusra and ISIS were engaged in bitter conflicts within Syria, the US became the de facto ally of Al-Nusra, despite protestations to the contrary.



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