

US special forces flee “moderate” rebels in Syria

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US special operations troops were compelled to flee from a village in northern Syria Friday after their lives were threatened by elements of the so-called Free Syrian Army, the amorphous group of Islamist militias that Washington has backed in its five-year-old war for regime change.

A video posted online showed a column of vehicles carrying the American special forces operatives speeding out of the village as a crowd of Islamist jihadis waving automatic weapons chanted anti-American slogans and death threats.

“We’re going to slaughter you,” the so-called “moderate rebels,” shouted. “Down with America. Get out you pigs.”

An individual who appeared to be leading the demonstration shouted, “The collaborators of America are dogs and pigs. They wage a crusader war against Syria and Islam.” Another man shouted, “Christians and Americans have no place among us.”

The appearance of the video coincided with the first report carried by the *Wall Street Journal* that the Pentagon had deployed a unit of 40 special forces troops to assist the Turkish army, which invaded Syria last month in an operation dubbed Euphrates Shield. It marks the first such direct attempt at US-Turkish collaboration in Syria since the Obama administration ordered the deployment of several hundred special operations troops in the country last spring.

While ostensibly the joint operation is aimed at routing the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) from towns it has occupied in northern Syria, Ankara’s overriding aim is to drive back Syrian Kurdish fighters of the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and prevent them from consolidating an autonomous Kurdish entity on Turkey’s border.

The videotaped incident took place outside the village

of al-Rai near the Turkish border. It is on the road leading south to the ISIS-held town of al-Bab, which is seen as a strategic link between the predominantly Kurdish cantons of Kobani and Afrin. The YPG Kurdish forces are determined to take the town, while Turkey is determined to deny it to them.

Until recently, the YPG has served as the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the principal US proxy ground forces in the war against ISIS, and had been armed, trained and supported by US special forces “advisers.” The attempt to deploy American special operations troops with the Turkish-backed militias raised the real prospect of US soldiers confronting each other on opposite sides of the battlefield.

The US alliance with the Kurdish forces was undoubtedly a factor in the anger of the so-called FSA fighters depicted in the video. These Sunni sectarian militias, however, are not only hostile to the Kurds, but also share the essential ideology of Al Qaeda.

The confrontation, which was largely blacked out by the US media, exposes the real character of the so-called “moderate opposition” backed by Washington and its regional allies—principally Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar—as well as the intractable contradictions created by the criminal and reckless policy pursued by Washington over the past five years in its systematic destruction of Syria.

The episode also provided embarrassing—from the Obama administration’s standpoint—confirmation of the charge levied by Russia that Washington is either unable or unwilling to pressure the Islamist militias that the CIA has armed and paid to abide by the terms of a ceasefire agreement reached last week between US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

“Despite the fact that the ceasefire regime in Syria

envisaged by the Russian-US agreement has lasted for four days now, the issue of the general ability of the ‘moderate opposition’ to observe it remains open,” Russian Defense Ministry representative Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said on Friday. “All attempts by our American partners to demonstrate to the world at least some manageability of their opposition activists in Syria have now failed,” the general added.

Vladimir Savchenko, the chief of Russia’s center for reconciliation of the warring parties in Syria, reported Friday that over the previous 24 hours there had been 39 separate instances of the so-called rebels shelling government positions and civilian areas. He said that the attacks indicated that the US-backed armed opposition was “once again using the ceasefire regime to restore its combat capabilities and regroup its forces.”

Russian officials have expressed particular frustration over Washington’s failure to provide information on the exact locations and the numbers involved of the so-called “moderate rebels,” which under the ceasefire agreement are supposed to separate themselves from the Al Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front, which recently renamed itself Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.

The reality is that the Al Qaeda forces are the dominant armed militias attacking the Syrian government of President Bashir al-Assad, and the existence of a “moderate,” much less secular, opposition is a propaganda invention of the US and its allies. The CIA-supported militias are largely integrated with the Al Nusra forces and could not survive independently of them.

Meanwhile, the US has attempted to foist the blame on the Syrian government and its ally, Russia, for the failure of a column of trucks bearing relief supplies to reach the besieged city of Aleppo. US officials have made it clear that Washington is prepared to utilize the delay as a pretext for abrogating the ceasefire deal, including most critically, the creation of a “joint implementation center” to coordinate US and Russian military operations in Syria.

“If, by Monday we have continued to see reduced violence and no humanitarian access there will be no Joint Implementation Center,” State Department spokesperson John Kirby told reporters on Friday.

The blocking of the aid column is bound up with the security of the road leading from the Turkish border

into “rebel”-held eastern Aleppo, which has been repeatedly shelled by the US-backed militias. The al-Nusra forces that predominate in the area, moreover, have held public demonstrations vowing to block any UN aid in protest against the ceasefire agreement.

The Obama administration has also resisted Russian proposals that the terms of the ceasefire deal be made public and be presented to the United Nations Security Council for its endorsement.

Underlying this reticence are deep divisions within the US state itself over the agreement with Russia. Pentagon officials, including the top uniformed commanders in the Middle East, have publicly expressed reservations over the agreement, indicating that they are not committed to implementing it, despite its having been approved by the US president.

Obama met Friday with Kerry, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, who reportedly opposed the ceasefire, and other top security officials.

Underlying the political divisions within the US government and statements by top generals bordering on insubordination are not only differences over the crisis-ridden US strategy in Syria. More fundamentally, the US military brass is focused increasingly on a direct military confrontation with Russia, the world’s number two nuclear power, and sees the ceasefire as cutting across the preparations for such a catastrophic conflict.



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