

# US vs Free Syrian Army vs Jabhat al-Nusra (and ISIS)

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The US administration has annexed the Syrian conflict to its own war on terror. It has tried to impose its battle on Syrians so that they will abandon their own battle against the tyrannical discriminatory Assadist junta. ... [but] the war on terror is centred around the state; it is a statist conception of the world order which strengthens states and weakens communities, political organizations, social movements, and individuals... In the record of this endless fight against terrorism there has not been a single success, and thus far three countries have been devastated over its course (Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria)."<sup>[1]</sup>

- *Yassin al-Haj Saleh, former Syrian Communist dissident who spent 16 years in Assad's dungeons*

## Introduction



This article deals with a specific aspect of the US role in the Syrian conflict: its drive to co-opt the **Free Syrian Army (FSA)** into a proxy force to fight only the jihadist forces of **Jabhat al-Nusra (now Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, or JFS)** and the **Islamic State (ISIS/Daesh)**, while giving up their fight against the Assad regime.

This reality sharply contrasts with the comic-book view widely expressed in tabloid journals of the mainstream, left and right, that alleges the Syrian rebellion against the dictatorship of Bashar Assad is a conspiracy involving both the US, al-Qaida, the Gulf states, Turkey, Israel, George Soros and many others.

In reality, the US and the al-Qaida spin-offs have been involved in Syria *on opposite sides from the outset*. It is a particularly bad case of "alternative news" when the US is depicted as "supporting" the forces it bombs in Syria - the Islamic State and Nusra/JFS (and often mainstream rebel groups<sup>[2]</sup>) - while supposedly "trying to overthrow" the Assad regime which is untouched by US bombing.

Both the US and Nusra/JFS are enemies of the Syrian revolution and the FSA; yet both act to undermine it *through maintaining some kind of relationship with it*. In this they play a different *tactical* role to the direct counterrevolutionary role of Russian imperialism and Iran, and also of the Islamic State.

*But in this process of "soft" undermining of the revolution from within, the US and Nusra/JFS have been in radical conflict with each other, forcing the FSA and other rebels to walk a fine line, given*

the overwhelming military superiority of their enemy.

## Overview: US policy on Syria

This story of deceit, conflict and betrayal involving the triangle US-FSA-Nusra is only one aspect of the US role in the Syrian conflict, so an overview of general US policy on Syria will be presented first.

Fundamentally, the US has always been hostile to the revolution, for the same reason imperialist powers generally oppose people's uprisings against "stable" capitalist regimes that serve their interests. The starting point needs to be an understanding that the long-term, multi-faceted, all-encompassing Syrian uprising *is a revolution*, regardless of the limitations of political leadership; and even more so, when looking at where the revolution has been at its strongest, that *class has been the more decisive factor* than sect and other issues that often appear to superficially dominate.

Yassin al-Haj Saleh sums up the regime as "an obscenely wealthy and atrociously brutal neo-bourgeoisie, which has proved itself ready to destroy the country in order to remain in power forever". Moreover, "in its relationship with its subjects, this regime reproduces the structure of imperial domination" which "is a thousand times more telling than any anti-imperialist rhetoric".<sup>[3]</sup>

This is central to understanding the American view, which was highlighted when US State Secretary Hilary Clinton's asserted that Bashar Assad was a "reformer"<sup>[4]</sup> as Assad was gunning down peaceful protest in early 2011.

At the same time, the US has no special love for particular representatives of such a "brutal neo-bourgeoisie", if in destroying its country it cannot crush the masses and instead only intensifies the revolutionary instability - the US assassination of its client, South Vietnamese dictator Ngo Diem in 1963 being a case in point. So eight months and thousands of deaths later, President Obama finally called on Assad to "step aside".

This "Yemeni solution" - named after the arrangement in Yemen whereby former dictator Saleh ceded power to his deputy to preserve a cosmetically 'reformed' regime - was spelled out when US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta, in July 2012, stressed that when Assad leaves, "the best way to preserve stability is to maintain as much of the military and police as you can, along with security forces, and hope that they will transition to a democratic form of government".<sup>[5]</sup> This has been US policy from Geneva I and II through recent rounds in close cooperation with Russia, in which even Assad himself could remain in a "transitional" government.<sup>[6]</sup>

US leaders understood that Assad cannot completely crush the uprising, and if the FSA were crushed it could only lead to further growth of Islamist and jihadist formations to absorb the dispossessed Sunni majority, given the real divisions among the population and the exploitation of them by the regime.

For a reformed capitalist regime to stabilise the country for capitalist rule would therefore, in this context, require it to incorporate some conservative sections of opposition leadership. Therefore, the more ideologically heterogeneous sections of the opposition, such as the FSA, should not be crushed, but weakened enough to be susceptible to co-optation; the search was on for a Syrian Abbas.

Thus *bare survival for the FSA was the purpose of US aid*: and the minimal level of this aid demonstrated this: it was never even remotely of the quantity or quality necessary for the FSA to win even tactical victories on the ground (let alone win outright), or *to allow a permanent "balance" with the regime*.

Till late 2013, the US only provided non-lethal aid (which was regularly cut off),<sup>[7]</sup> such as binoculars, radios, “ready-meals” and tents.<sup>[8]</sup> When the CIA arrived on the Turkish and Jordanian borders in mid-2012, its role was blocking others from supplying the advanced weapons that the FSA needed,<sup>[9]</sup> especially anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons;<sup>[10]</sup> often the US blocked any weapons getting to the FSA.<sup>[11]</sup>

The US embargo on anti-aircraft weapons remains today; given that Assad has been waging an air war since 2012, this is a fundamental aspect of US intervention; even when FSA groups tried to buy portable anti-aircraft missiles (manpads) on the black market, “somehow, the Americans found out and our purchase was blocked”.<sup>[12]</sup>

When the US finally began providing some “vetted” rebels with light arms in late 2013 – i.e. the kind of weaponry which they already manufactured or captured<sup>[13]</sup> – reports of rebels being supplied 16 bullets a month exemplified the limited objectives of this “support”.<sup>[14]</sup> As for the concurrent CIA training program, many rebels who already knew how to fight felt the main American interest was surveillance.<sup>[15]</sup>

The rest of the essay will look at the main purpose of this “aid” to some Syrian rebels: the main US aim has been to try to re-direct them away from fighting Assad into its own “war on terror” as a deliberate counter-revolutionary strategy.

## **Some background: the US-FSA-Nusra triangle of conflict**

Two lines on the question of dealing with jihadism have been in conflict throughout the war.

The first is *the Syrian revolutionary line*. The rebels see the Assad regime as their main enemy, and believe attempting to defeat the jihadists without defeating Assad would be unsuccessful, because the regime is responsible for conditions leading to jihadism. However, they have clashed with Nusra/JFS throughout the conflict on their own terms, *defending themselves or their communities* against Nusra/JFS attacks. At the same time, they often cooperate militarily against the massively more powerful regime; and *have refused US prodding to launch a frontal attack on Nusra/JFS*, which they see as suicidal for the anti-Assad forces. However, the dramatically more violent terror against the Syrian people launched by ISIS led the rebels to make their own decision in late 2013 to *launch an all-out frontal attack on it*; but did not view this war as taking precedence over their war against the regime: they fight the dual counterrevolution.

The opposing US-backed line was *the imperialist-Sawhat line*, named after the Sunni militias recruited by the US in 2006-07 to defeat al-Qaida in Iraq. Mobilising Sunni fighters to fight Sunni jihadists was a positive step for the US compared to its previous reliance on Iranian-backed Shiites, which encouraged sectarian slaughter. However, the US-Iranian backed Shia-led regime dropped its promises to incorporate Sunni into the regime once al-Qaida was defeated, hence its negative connotations. In Syria, the Sawhat’s key differences with the revolutionary position are that, firstly, the US has pushed the FSA to launch a full frontal attack on Nusra as well as ISIS, and secondly, to gain US support even for their own war against ISIS, the US demands the rebels *fight ISIS only and end their fight against the regime*.

For most part the FSA has walked this fine line successfully – *defensively* fighting Nusra attacks, while rejecting US demands to launch *a frontal offensive* on Nusra, launching its own war against ISIS while rejecting US demands to stop fighting the regime – highlighting the absurdity of claims that the FSA is either a CIA or an al-Qaida front.

The FSA is the armed expression of the 2011 uprising, composed of troops who decided to protect fellow Syrians rather than killing them, and popular forces who armed themselves for protection against Assad's violence. Its main goal is the overthrow of the Assad dictatorship. But the Islamic State set up its own murderous dictatorship which also must be overthrown. The problem with the US line - of fighting ISIS *only* - is that the very conditions that led to the rise of ISIS in eastern Syria and western Iraq - the large-scale political and social dispossession of Sunni Arabs by the Assad regime and its allied, US-backed Iraqi sectarian regime - are thereby entrenched. Syrian revolutionaries therefore see the overthrow of Assad as a prerequisite for the destruction of ISIS - the very reverse of the US strategy.

## Sporadic early FSA clashes with Jabhat al-Nusra

To demonstrate this, we will first review the early clashes between the FSA and Nusra. The first main cause was when Nusra tried to capture FSA-controlled regions. In March 2013, for example, fighting broke out between the FSA-aligned Farouk Brigades and Nusra in Tal Abyad, as the latter attempted to seize the Turkish border post from the FSA.<sup>[16]</sup>

The other reason for clashes was to defend communities from Nusra, accompanied by popular demonstrations against theocratic repression. In Idlib, protests and clashes began in late 2012.<sup>[17]</sup> In Raqqa, liberated in March 2013, demonstrations broke out against Nusra, including women's demonstrations;<sup>[18]</sup> heated discussions between FSA and Nusra cadres highlighted the tensions, but also the fact that Nusra was unable to forcibly impose its rule.<sup>[19]</sup> When Nusra executed three captured military officers, local coordination committees organised demonstrations, chanting "Not Sunni and not Alawite, our revolution is for civil freedom". In Kafranbel in Idlib, demonstrators raised a banner reading "Executions in Raqqa, and lashing in Saraqib. Who's given you legitimacy to rule the people?" In Aleppo they chanted "The Sharia Committee has become the Air Force Intelligence", or "What a shame, what a shame, shabbiha have become revolutionaries".<sup>[20]</sup>

FSA units often went to the aid of protestors. In June 2013, in the Jabal al-Wastani region of Idlib, Nusra assassinated two civilians, accusing them of owning a bar, and tried to arrest someone they accused of working for the regime. Fighters from the National Unity Brigade of the FSA prevented them, and seven FSA battalions forced Nusra out. When Nusra tried to force a checkpoint in another village, they were arrested and barred them from the region.<sup>[21]</sup>

During a battle in the Damascus region, an FSA soldier got angry and cursed God. When a Nusra chief demanded he be charged with blasphemy, the local FSA battalion kicked Nusra out of the area. An FSA activist stated "If Nusra are going to be extremist, their services are not wanted". In the village of Museifra in Daraa, Nusra executed a local man they accused of working for the regime. Civilians "surrounded the al-Nusra court with heavy weapons and forced the jihadists out of the village". In the village of Medineh, when a local was ordered to appear before a Nusra "sharia council", he "drove his car by the relevant building and threw a bomb inside, killing five Nusra militants".<sup>[22]</sup>

In September 2013, FSA units defeated Nusra in the eastern city of Abu Kamal. The ceasefire forced Nusra to expel foreign fighters, established that security would be handled by FSA-affiliated groups, prohibited Nusra checkpoints, and stipulated that a court order was required for house-raids, which could only be performed by FSA brigades. These clashes make nonsense of assertions that the FSA is part of a "jihadi" conspiracy. But they also revealed *that Nusra was unable to impose its full control, and that it could be defeated*. Following the Abu Kamal events, *Nusra issued a two-page apology to the people of Abu Kamal!*<sup>[23]</sup>

This was the start of a softening of Nusra views and actions. Nusra leader al-Joulani “denounced transgressions by al-Nusra fighters and called for redressing how the civilians in Nusra-controlled areas are dealt with”.<sup>[24]</sup> The context was the split between Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) around mid-2013. Nusra’s most reactionary elements, and most foreign fighters, went with ISIS. Nusra’s relative moderation reflected the pressure of its mostly Syrian base, many of whom only joined Nusra due to its superior funds, arms and organisation compared to the FSA, rather than due to ideological commitment;<sup>[25]</sup> many quit FSA units to join Nusra for these reasons. “If you join al-Nusra, there is always a gun for you but many of the FSA brigades can’t even provide bullets for their fighters”, according to a fighter in Idlib.<sup>[26]</sup>

In September 2013, the entire 11th Division of the FSA, based in Raqqa, joined the smaller, but better-armed Nusra branch, to better resist ISIS.<sup>[27]</sup> When a rebel coalition led by this “Nusra”, stuffed with FSA ranks, briefly liberated Raqqa from ISIS in January 2014, they removed the black flags which ISIS had placed on the spires of Christian churches.<sup>[28]</sup> In April 2014, this Raqqa Revolutionaries Brigade re-emerged from “Nusra”, and became the main FSA ally of the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) defending Kobani against ISIS.

This highlights the contradiction between the sectarian Nusra leadership and many of its ranks.

From mid-2013 until late 2014, FSA-Nusra clashes virtually ceased; both focused on fighting the regime, alongside various mainstream Islamist brigades.

## **US drive to turn FSA into the ‘Sawhat’ against Jabhat al-Nusra**

These sporadic clashes with Nusra demonstrate that the FSA is not some “jihadi” organisation. But the other side of this equation was the policy being pushed by the US.

As shown above, the limited US “support” to the FSA demonstrated its hostility to the latter’s revolutionary objectives, but the US is *also* hostile to the jihadist forces. However, *this hostility to the latter is used as cover for its hostility to the whole revolution*. “We can’t send arms to the FSA because they might end up with the jihadists.” Yet when this becomes “we need to send some arms to FSA moderates to boost them against the jihadists”, such arms are severely inadequate.

What better way to deal with both than to prematurely set the “moderate” FSA against the jihadists, and let them kill each other, in the face of the regime’s overwhelming power, sapping the FSA’s revolutionary potential by turning it into a Syrian “Sawhat”?

When rebel commanders met US intelligence officers in late 2012 to discuss getting US arms, the US officers were only interested in discussing drone strikes on Nusra, and enlisting the rebels to join the attack. When the FSA members said that unity against Assad’s more powerful forces was paramount at present, the US officers replied: “We’d prefer you fight Al Nusra now, and then fight Assad’s army” [later].<sup>[29]</sup> This has been the main condition on which the US has offered to send a few guns to select FSA units ever since.

The G8 communique in June 2013 made no mention of the regime but called for the expulsion from Syria of “al Qaida and any other non-state actors linked to terrorism”, while French president Francois Hollande demanded rebels expel “extremist” groups as a condition for getting any French arms.<sup>[30]</sup>

So, if the FSA’s clashes with Nusra showed it was not a “jihadist” organ, was it a “CIA” organ willing

to carry out these US orders? Not at all: FSA clashes with Nusra had been on their own terms, and defensive in nature. According to FSA Colonel Akaidi, from the Aleppo military council, if the US wants to turn the FSA “into the Sahwat” and thus “help us so that we kill each other, then we don’t want their help”<sup>[31]</sup>.

The FSA wanted to avoid full-scale war with Nusra to prevent anti-Assad fighters killing each other in the context of Assad’s massive military superiority; the contradictory nature of many of Nusra’s anti-Assad ranks was another reason. It was Nusra that was provoking conflict with its reactionary consequences, while the US, from the opposite side, was also pushing for a full-scale confrontation.

Even when the US first listed Nusra as a “terrorist organisation” in December 2012, many Syrians took to the streets claiming “There is no terrorism in Syria except that of Assad”,<sup>[32]</sup> though other revolution activists disapproved of slogans which could imply sympathy for Nusra. But their message was that, given Assad’s greater terror, the US could not tell them who their enemy was: hardly the message of CIA proxies.

Thus the imaginary US-FSA-al-Qaida conspiracy against Assad collapses on both sides.

## **The FSA and rebel war on ISIS**

But the period of relative peace with Nusra was not the end of the FSA’s war on jihadism. While Nusra’s Syrian base acted to partially moderate its behaviour, the split had the opposite effect on ISIS, whose base among foreign jihadi fighters, whose very presence in Syria was dependent on their sponsor, facilitated its imposition of open terror.

While Nusra focused on fighting the regime, ISIS and the regime largely ignored each other to concentrate their fire on the rebels.<sup>[33]</sup> The second half of 2013 saw a growing war as the FSA acted to defend the masses in liberated zones from ISIS attempts to impose theocratic tyranny.

From the outset, ISIS was far more brutal than Nusra, firing into demonstrations with live ammunition and brutally killing rebels.<sup>[34]</sup> When ISIS assassinated senior FSA leader Kamal al-Hamami in Latakia on July 11 2013, the FSA declared “war” on ISIS.<sup>[35]</sup> When it seized control of Raqqa, ISIS acted with wanton violence, leading the FSA Raqqa Revolutionaries Front to launch resistance.<sup>[36]</sup> In August, ISIS drove the Ahfad al-Rasoul brigades out of Raqqa by destroying their headquarters with car bombs, and in September launched a campaign of “Purification of Filth” aimed at destroying the FSA. Clashes erupted in Deir Ezzor; in Aleppo, where 44 fighters were killed in October; in Azaz, where the FSA Northern Storm resisted an ISIS drive to seize the border; and throughout the country.<sup>[37]</sup>

The survival of the revolution required decisive action. On January 2014, the major FSA and Islamist brigades launched a full-frontal war on ISIS throughout Syria,<sup>[38]</sup> significantly, this was triggered by nation-wide demonstrations against ISIS on January 3,<sup>[39]</sup> calling ISIS “alien invaders” and demanding their expulsion.<sup>[40]</sup> This was evidence of a continued link between the civil uprising and its military reflection.

Within weeks, the rebels had driven ISIS entirely from Idlib, Hama, Latakia and most of Aleppo, then in the east from Deir Ezzor and briefly even Raqqa, *the biggest and most rapid defeat suffered by ISIS any time in the war*. Western Syria has remained free of ISIS ever since.

Not only did the rebels achieve this without US air support, the Assad regime bombed them in support of ISIS, even helping ISIS reconquer towns it had been driven from.<sup>[41]</sup> Areas that were

untouched by regime bombs while under ISIS control were immediately subjected to regime bombing once under rebel control.<sup>[42]</sup>

After refusing to arm the FSA because jihadists who *fight alongside the FSA* might get their hands on the arms, now the US refused to arm the FSA because these jihadists might get their hands on the arms while *fighting against the FSA!* Although the FSA attacked ISIS with its own agenda, one might assume US leaders would be pleased it was doing what they had been demanding, yet the US was reluctant “to boost assistance to moderate groups battling ISIS *until the fighting in northern Syria ends*”.<sup>[43]</sup>

The *New York Times* explained that “neither of the two sides in the rebel fighting presents a particularly attractive face to Western policy makers”,<sup>[44]</sup> while James Clapper, US director of national intelligence, asserted that Nusra, then aiding the rebels against ISIS, had aspirations to attack the US - an absurd proposition.<sup>[45]</sup>

An explanation more in keeping with US policy was that the US refused to aid the rebels *even against ISIS* unless the rebels dropped the fight against the regime.

This same pattern - Assad bombing to help ISIS against the rebels and the US refusing to aid the rebels against ISIS - continued when ISIS made a comeback in eastern Syria following its windfall of advanced US weaponry seized in Mosul in June. In June-July, rebels held out in the city of Deir Ezzor for weeks against an ISIS siege, during which the Assad regime bombed the rebels in tandem with ISIS, helping it seize the city.<sup>[46]</sup>

The US, already bombing ISIS in Iraq, refused to aid the Deir Ezzor rebels against ISIS. Yet, from the time conflict between the regime and ISIS over Deir Ezzor began in November 2014, the US has been bombing on the side of the regime.<sup>[47]</sup>

## **The myth that the CIA and Pentagon programs were in conflict**

The secret CIA program of supplying light arms and “training” to “vetted” FSA groups from late 2013 is often contrasted to the \$500 million Pentagon program, launched later in 2014, to equip an armed force to *fight ISIS only and not the regime*.

As we will see, the Pentagon’s “full Sawhat” collapsed: attracting anti-Assad fighters to a force banned from fighting Assad was a logical disaster.

The CIA program, by contrast, is usually presented as anti-Assad, aimed at helping the rebels exert military pressure on the regime. We even read that the CIA and Pentagon were working at cross purposes.

However, a closer look shows that this was façade: not only because the weapons were grossly inadequate for the purpose of pressuring a regime with such massively superior killing equipment, or for defending already held positions; but also because the purpose of *the CIA’s co-optation was for a more round-about, yet more effective, route to the same destination as the absurd Pentagon program*. The CIA understood the need to “sweeten up” viable rebel groups first before bending them into a viable Sawhat.

## CIA's TOW program: Helping fight Assad or same old Sawhat?

Once the rebel war on ISIS had reached its limits, the US did begin a program of tightly controlled delivery of "TOW" anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) to several of the "vetted" FSA groups who had defeated ISIS.

The delivery of TOWs does not prove the US is supplying them; most are supplied by Saudi Arabia from its own stocks.<sup>[48]</sup> However, it is understood that the Saudis must have US permission to deliver US-made weapons, though the reality may be more tug-o-war at times.

This followed a two-year CIA-enforced embargo on US allies supplying anti-tank weapons to the rebels<sup>[49]</sup> (meanwhile, the US has continued to vigorously maintain its embargo on anti-aircraft weapons).<sup>[50]</sup> But the rebels' increasing ability to capture anti-tank weapons from the regime anyway,<sup>[51]</sup> and use them effectively, pushed the US to change direction and instead try to take some control of this supply as a co-option tool (and the TOWs were less efficient than Russian-made Konkurs and Kornets which the rebels have captured).<sup>[52]</sup>

The first TOWs were delivered in April 2014, and the number of groups receiving TOWs soon spread to nine,<sup>[53]</sup> though they only received "a few dozen TOW antitank missiles" between them, "resulting in a minimal effect on the battlefield".<sup>[54]</sup> By the end of the year it was down to only four groups,<sup>[55]</sup> with few weapons actually being delivered to anyone.<sup>[56]</sup> What occurred in between?

The large Idlib-based FSA coalition, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF), is often referred to as one of the "US-backed" TOW recipients. However, it was not on the initial list of groups receiving TOWs, and its leader, Jamal Maarouf, claimed "We have received lots of promises from the US, but so far nothing more".<sup>[57]</sup> The SRF, which had successfully driven ISIS from Idlib, was also dedicated to overthrowing Assad.

But while Maarouf's "immediate group of fighters" did not receive TOWs, "some of the other factions who pledged allegiance to his front did". An April video depicting cadre from an SRF component, the Ghab Wolves Brigade, training in the use of TOWs, helps explain why, when a fighter reveals: "The weapons are sent by the Americans...and they *only give weapons to those who specifically fight ISIS*. They are *not* giving us weapons to fight Assad, they give us weapons to fight ISIS".<sup>[58]</sup>

In June 2014 Nusra suddenly ended the year-long truce and launched a murderous attack on the SRF in Idlib. In response, the SRF, Harakat Hazm and other local FSA groups (Division 13, Division 101, Fursan al-Haq, etc.) decided to "suspend any and all forms of cooperation and coordination with the Jabhat al Nusra".<sup>[59]</sup>

However, there was a *difference between not cooperating with Nusra and the US demand to wage war against it*. The SRF stressed that "despite al-Nusra's atrocities, the SRF *has no intention to carry weapons against al-Nusra*, as it is busy fighting the Syrian regime",<sup>[60]</sup> thus refusing to become a Sawhat brigade.

The US initially had more faith in another northern FSA coalition, Harakat Hazm (some of whose member groups had quit the SRF), to which the first TOWs were delivered in April 2014. But the TOWs were few and far between, with shipments containing "only three or four missiles", which were "no better than the Russian weapons" they captured from the SAA. Hazm leaders admitted to still fighting alongside Nusra, despite the declaration ending cooperation, since "the failure of the U.S. to deliver adequate weapons leaves them unable to refuse whatever allies come their way,



including those with opposing politics”<sup>[61]</sup>.

Hazm was caught in a vice: the paucity of US support forced them to maintain some cooperation with Nusra; yet this cooperation was used by the US to wind down support.

The real goal of this US “support” was explained by a former Hazm member: “by September 2014 the United States started to pressure us *to leave the battle field against Assad and to send all our forces to fight ISIS*. We had no problem to go fight ISIS, but wouldn’t agree to stop fighting Assad. From then on, our relations with the Americans went from bad to worse and eventually they stopped backing us. When Jabhat al-Nusra attacked us, we had already lost all foreign support...because we dared to disobey the Americans”<sup>[62]</sup>.

## **US launches war on ISIS and Nusra and dumps FSA**

The test came when the US-led Coalition started bombing ISIS in September; the US also bombed Nusra from the first day, even though Nusra, with all its faults and crimes, was not engaged in the kinds of near-genocidal activities that ISIS and the regime were. Since Nusra was based in many of the same regions as the rebels, US bombs hit other rebels, especially Ahrar al-Sham,<sup>[63]</sup> and killed numerous civilians. The regime was untouched by US bombs, and welcomed the US intervention,<sup>[64]</sup> collaborating with it via intelligence sharing<sup>[65]</sup> and coordinated bombing.<sup>[66]</sup>

Now was the time for “US-backed” groups who had received handfuls of TOWs to aid the US in destroying the jihadists. Yet despite their own war against ISIS, and conflict with Nusra, they refused to endorse a campaign that targeted only these groups but not the regime.

Harakat Hazm issued a powerful statement condemning the US bombing as “a violation of national sovereignty and an attack on the revolution”<sup>[67]</sup>. The SRF joined a dozen large FSA-linked and Islamist brigades and denounced the US air strikes as aiding Assad.<sup>[68]</sup> Most FSA and rebel brigades denounced the US intervention.<sup>[69]</sup>

Failing this US proxy test, the FSA was excluded from the start from any voice in the US-led coalition to fight ISIS;<sup>[70]</sup> John Allen, the general in charge of the coalition, confirmed that “there is no formal coordination with the FSA”,<sup>[71]</sup> while Pentagon spokesman John Kirby declared the US does not “have a willing, capable, effective partner” in Syria.<sup>[72]</sup> This lack of coordination led to near-strikes against the FSA.<sup>[73]</sup>

This was the background to the reports by late 2014 showing the US had virtually halted all support to the FSA.<sup>[74]</sup>

## **Nusra launches war on the FSA, US throws them under a bus**

The US attack on Nusra also provides background to Nusra’s destruction of the SRF in Idlib in November and Harakat Hazm in in Aleppo in January 2015. Most Nusra cadres in Deir Ezzor had fled to Idlib following their defeat by ISIS in July; battle-hardened fighters, weapons and experience flooded in, suddenly making Idlib a new Nusra stronghold. But the SRF was a competitor in Idlib, and Nusra does not like competition.

The bombing led to a surge in support for Nusra, seen as the martyr of an unjust US attack that benefited Assad. In mass demonstrations throughout Aleppo, Idlib, and Homs, demonstrators chanted “We are all Nusra” or “Nusra came to support us when the world abandoned us”<sup>[75]</sup>.

Nusra used this surge in moral authority to turn on the SRF and Hazm. Its propaganda claimed that any groups that had accepted US weapons were US proxies. Despite their refusal to be the Sawhat, Nusra's case was helped by the very vocal way in which the US advocated the FSA use its weapons against Nusra.

Demonstrations in support of the SRF broke out in the SRF heartland, with a strong role played by women,<sup>[76]</sup> but Nusra's martyr status neutralised opposition to Nusra's attack elsewhere in Idlib. It also militated against the SRF putting up stiff resistance; it maintained its established policy to avoid soaking the province in fratricidal bloodshed.

Meanwhile, the winding down of US support meant that the SRF, Hazm and the FSA were in a weaker military position had they wanted to confront Nusra, while in a *weaker position politically* due to Nusra being bombed by what was seen as their US backer. As one FSA official put it, "*We have a huge American flag our back but not a gun in our hand*".<sup>[77]</sup>

Faysal Itani sums up this US policy:

US airstrikes on JAN immediately produced a new and powerful rival to already vulnerable moderate forces. By striking JAN without sufficiently strengthening its moderate counterparts first, and promising (publicly, no less) to use them to fight JAN and not the regime, the United States made the opposition appear just threatening enough to provoke JAN, but not so threatening as to deter the jihadist group.<sup>[78]</sup>

## **State of the Free Syrian Army at the outset of 2015**

Nusra's crushing of the SRF and Harakat Hazm did not end the FSA in the north. There were other large FSA units in the Idlib and Aleppo regions (e.g. Division 13, Fursan al-Haq and others who formed the 5th Brigade coalition) and countless smaller units. In addition, there were various rebel groups with some kind of "Islamist" reference but were not "Salafist", such as Jaysh al-Mujahideen, Jabhat al-Shamiya and the MB-linked Faylaq al-Sham.

The 10-20,000 SRF and Hazm troops did not just disappear. Many went to these other FSA groups; many Hazm cadre in Aleppo joined Jabhat al-Shamiya; some SRF cadre in Idlib joined an expanded Ahrar al-Sham (Nusra's aggression against the SRF was condemned by Ahrar al-Sham leaders).<sup>[79]</sup> Some SRF cadre deserted to Nusra at the outset, but even some cadre who had opposed Nusra's takeover subsequently fought under Nusra purely as a powerful vehicle to keep fighting the regime, another indication of the fluidity of group membership.<sup>[80]</sup>

Relative strengths led to markedly different military coalitions. In Aleppo, the Fatah Halab (Aleppo Conquest) coalition of over 30 major brigades – FSA, soft-Islamist, and Ahrar al-Sham – excluded Nusra from membership. Nusra's disagreements with other rebels led it to largely withdraw from northern Aleppo province and Aleppo city.<sup>[81]</sup> Nusra remained in a strong position in south-west Aleppo bordering Idlib, but even there was continually challenged by popular protest, especially in towns such as al-Atarib.<sup>[82]</sup>

In contrast, Idlib now became Nusra's main base. While it did not "rule" Idlib, the exclusion it faced in Aleppo was impossible. The new military coalition, Jaysh al-Fatah (Army of Conquest), comprised eight groups, of which Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham were the two largest. Others (Faylaq al-Sham, Ajnad al-Sham) were part of the 'soft-Islamist' middle; while Jaysh al-Sunna was a "non-ideological" brigade of Homs exiles.<sup>[83]</sup> In the string of major victories in early 2015 (Idlib city, Jush al-Shugr,

etc.), the major FSA Idlib brigades (Division 13, Fursan al-Haq) fought alongside Jaysh al-Fatah, but were not members.

South of Idlib, FSA brigades were more prominent: in northern Latakia province, the FSA First Coastal brigade; in northern Hama, the FSA Nasr Brigades; in Homs, the new Homs Liberation Front.

## **US allies and proxies against ISIS: whoever does not fight Assad**

When the US ground down its support to northern FSA groups in late 2014, it shifted its support in several directions. What these different forces had in common was that they did not fight Assad.

In the north, the Pentagon announced its \$500 million plan to train and equip “vetted” individual rebels (rather than FSA units) to form a new force from scratch to fight ISIS.<sup>[84]</sup> It collapsed in a heap. The vetting process reduced the initial 1200 fighters interested to 125, the rest either rejected by the US or quit. While more than willing to fight ISIS, they rejected the US demand that they sign a declaration pledging that their weapons would *only* be used against ISIS and *not* against the regime.<sup>[85]</sup>

Even worse, the Pentagon first engaged in a week of bombing Nusra in northern Syria before dispatching the first 54 fighters of “Division 30” into that very region.<sup>[86]</sup> Not surprisingly, they were captured by Nusra. In a statement concerning the attack on Division 30, Nusra claimed the captured fighters admitted that their job was to fight Nusra “and other terrorist groups”, and accused them of spotting for the US air strikes.<sup>[87]</sup>

Of course, “confessing” while Nusra captives is hardly reliable, but the context makes these assertions plausible. They also blend with suspicions among Syrian rebels; several weeks earlier, the MB-connected Liwa al Haqq warned that “all the checkpoints need to inspect those coming from Turkey. There are stray dogs the Americans have finished training that will enter Syria soon. Their mission is spying and assassinations”.<sup>[88]</sup>

Whether this disaster was US incompetence or malice was the only question. One local activist noted that “sending in the 54 and then bombing JAN a few miles away from their positions – implying the 54 acted as spotters for the US Air Force – looks like constructing a case that “See, all our well-meant support is hopeless”, justifying the US abandonment of the FSA *even for Sawhat purposes*.<sup>[89]</sup>

Meanwhile, in the south, the US cobbled together the New Syrian Army. In November 2015, the NSA, backed by US air strikes, expelled ISIS from the al-Tanf border crossing with Iraq, releasing a video showing copious US weaponry. Later it launched a failed raid on Abu Kamal, where the going was tough, because many Deir Ezzor rebels “distrust its American backers”, especially because the NSA’s introductory video made no mention of fighting the regime.<sup>[90]</sup>

Meanwhile, while backing these toothless ventures, the Pentagon refused to provide air cover the FSA and allied rebel forces in their ongoing conflict with ISIS east of the strategic frontline rebel-held towns Mare and Tal Rifaat in northern Aleppo province. In June 2015, the Syrian air force bombed the rebels “assisting an Islamic State offensive on rebel-held areas”.<sup>[91]</sup>

Explaining why the US did not aid the rebels against ISIS, Pentagon spokesman Colonel Steven Warren said the rebels are not a “willing partner on the ground”.<sup>[92]</sup> But according to the Syrian American Council, US officials gave “the astounding reason that aiding the rebels in Aleppo would

hurt Assad, which would anger the Iranians, who might then turn up the heat on U.S. troops in Iraq<sup>[93]</sup>”.

However, a year later, the US did launch several air strikes in support of a new north Aleppo rebel brigade attacking ISIS. The Mu'tasim Brigade also became the first ever rebel brigade in Syria to receive airdropped weapons from the US, insignificant quantities. This US support is explained by the views of the brigade's leader, Mu'tasim Abbas: “When extremist groups started festering in our society... *We redirected our battles just to fighting ISIS and other extremists ... Once we get rid of ISIS, then the regime will crumble*”<sup>[94]</sup>.

However, by late 2014 the main US ally on the ground had shifted to the Kurdish-based Peoples Protection Units (YPG), led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), already involved in its own war against ISIS in northeast Syria. In 2015, the US helped hammer together the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), consisting overwhelmingly of the YPG alongside small numbers of Arab fighters from rebel or non-rebel groups in northeast Syria.

Since late 2014, every YPG (and SDF) offensive against ISIS has been heavily backed by fully coordinated US air strikes; the YPG/SDF is the only group in Syria with the right to call in US air strikes; US arms have been dropped directly to them in the field; hundreds of US special forces have been sent in to work with them;<sup>[95]</sup> and several US air bases have been built in their territory.<sup>[96]</sup>

The YPG/SDF are not US proxies. They have their own goals, centred around a Kurdish autonomy expanded into what they call a ‘democratic confederalist’ entity that incorporates non-Kurds and promises a revolutionary model for post-Assad Syria. It is not the aim of this essay to assess the realities of this project. The point is merely that the US and the YPG/SDF are currently allied as their interests have converged.

Spokespeople for both sides claim that the US provides air cover for the YPG/SDF because they are the “most effective” fighters against ISIS. They were indeed effective, especially when fighting to liberate Kurdish-populated territory from ISIS tyranny. However, as we saw above, the FSA/rebels drove ISIS out of the whole of western Syria without any US air strikes to aid them.

Thus both the FSA/rebels and the YPG/SDF have been effective fighters against ISIS, due to their real roots among the populations they represent. Both have done a much better job than the Assad regime, whose only victory against ISIS was the reconquest of Palmyra (after spectacularly losing it), with the aid of Russian air strikes; Assad then *lost it again*, and the second reconquest was carried out with the aid of both Russian and US air strikes.<sup>[97]</sup>

Rather, the issue is what the YPG/SDF has in common with the US proxy forces: *it fights only ISIS, and not the Assad regime*. In its case, this is their own decision; the Assad regime made a pragmatic deal with the PYD in 2012 to withdraw its forces from the three main concentrations of Kurdish-majority territory, leaving them to the PYD. This was not due to Assad's love for Kurdish autonomy; it merely enabled Assad to concentrate his fire on revolutionary forces elsewhere; nor to any PYD love for Assad –not getting barrel-bombed like everyone else has its advantages.

Nevertheless, this policy of not fighting the Assad regime meant that the US condition imposed on ex-rebel proxies was already met by this far more significant fighting force of its own accord. Thus the US-PYD alliance makes war on ISIS in eastern Syria, while both can ignore Assad and Russia bombing the revolutionary populations in western Syria.

# US subversion of the Southern Front

Though the main US shift, when it dumped the FSA in the north, went towards proxies or the YPG, another subtle shift was towards the real FSA in the south, the Southern Front, based in Daraa province. With 35,000 troops in over 50 brigades, the SF carried out a string of victories in in late 2014 and early 2015.

The SF's democratic, secularist anti-sectarian politics,<sup>[98]</sup> alongside its dominance over jihadist groups in the south, is often cited as the reason for this new US support, as the numbers of TOWs increased among SF groups, as they were drying up in the north.

However, like the abandoned SRF and Hazm, and unlike the YPG and the Pentagon proxies, the SF's main enemy was the regime. Did this indicate actual US support for anti-Assad resistance in the south?

In mid-2015, the SF released a declaration rejecting "any military or [ideological] cooperation or rapprochement with the Al-Nusra Front or any takfiri [ideology] adopted by any group among the ranks of the Syrian rebels",<sup>[99]</sup> provoked by Nusra claiming "victories" that had been made by the SF. Like all Syrian rebels, the SF vigorously condemned the massacre of some 20 Druze in Idlib by a Nusra unit and announced "its readiness to protect Druze villages".

However, this was well within FSA-revolution, rather than 'Sawhat', parameters. The SF made clear that ceasing cooperation with Nusra "is not a declaration of war" and would not "face off" with Nusra.<sup>[100]</sup> So, like the SRF-Hazm-FSA non-cooperation statement in Idlib, and the exclusion of Nusra from Fatah Halab in Aleppo, this highlights the fine line the FSA tries to walk between the demands of the jihad and the demands of the Sawhat.

US support to the southern FSA, coordinated via the Military Operations Centre (MOC) in Amman, consisting mostly of US, Jordanian and Saudi intelligence officers, had not always been forthcoming. In May 2013, for example, MOC deliberately held back arms to rebels facing a strategic battle in the southern town Khirbet Ghazaleh, leading to its capture by Assad.<sup>[101]</sup> Throughout summer 2013, the US failed to supply "a single rifle or bullet to the FSA in Daraa", and "actively prevented deliveries" of Saudi arms and ammunition.<sup>[102]</sup> It also involved training a group of people to maintain order in the event of a catastrophic collapse of the Assad regime, rather than to fight Assad.<sup>[103]</sup>

The new US interest in arming the SF was connected to the war on ISIS. Unlike the Pentagon shambles, the CIA wanted to work through viable military organisations, all of which were fighting the regime. The US strategy appears to have been to allow the SF to feel some victories, then once a level of dependence was created, turn on the screws.

After the SF's string of victories in early 2015 (taking the Jordanian border crossing at Nasib, Sheik Miskeen, Nawa, the historic town of Bushra al-Sham, and regime base 52), the US and MOC imposed a series of "red lines", where the SF was not to go.<sup>[104]</sup> These included the central area of Daraa city, the neighbouring province Suweida, north towards the city of Sasa, and any attempt to link up with the rebel-held suburbs of Damascus.

SF offensives to take Daraa city, and the Thala airbase, were unsupported,<sup>[105]</sup> or blocked.<sup>[106]</sup> According to some reports, if the SF violated the "red line" against advancing towards Damascus, it would come under US attack.<sup>[107]</sup>

By mid-2015 the MOC had scaled back support for the SF,<sup>[108]</sup> and use of TOWs trickled off in late

2015 “and totally vanished in the first two weeks of 2016”, though SF spokesman Isam El Rayyes denied this was new; rather “MOC-licensed resupplies have remained as low as they ever were”.<sup>[109]</sup> Reports in early 2016 indicated that Jordan had “forced the Southern Front to halt all military actions”. The context included Jordan’s acquiescence with the Russian invasion, and indications that Jordan would be happy with the Assad regime re-taking the entire region from the SF.<sup>[110]</sup>

When the US and Russia jointly tasked Jordan with listing “terrorist” organisations to be excluded from talks, Jordan’s list included some 160 rebel groups.<sup>[111]</sup>

However, a full regime reconquest of Daraa would be a major undertaking; as long as the SF is held back by red lines and arms freezes, it posed no problem to the regime’s aim of destroying the main revolutionary centres there (East Ghouta, Moadamiya, Darayya, etc.).

The US-Jordan strategy involved the familiar Sawhat: in January 2016, MOC officials told the SF to stop attacking regime forces and instead focus their efforts on the jihadists, and fighting Nusra was even more important than fighting ISIS. *If they did as demanded, they were promised new weaponry.*<sup>[112]</sup>

In May, the MOC tasked some 4500 SF troops with driving ISIS-connected militia out of some pockets around Daraa, telling the SF it was “tired of your excuses” for “delaying” these operations, and warning it would cut cash flows until they scored victories over ISIS.<sup>[113]</sup>

In March 2016, the SF took part in the US-Russia facilitated nation-wide ceasefire. In reality, however, it was only a *lull in bombing*: so while the regime continued bombing at lower intensity – particularly in Aleppo and Darayya in the Damascus suburbs – “maintaining the ceasefire” became the new rationale for holding back the SF.

In May 2016, new US/MOC “red-lines” were set in a meeting with rebel groups from around the country, deeming the “destruction of military and security structures” in Syria a “red line”, and called on rebels, as part of a peace process, to “join the ranks of the Syrian Army in its fight against Jabhat al-Nusra and all armed groups that refuse to join the Army”.<sup>[114]</sup>

## **The betrayal of Darayya**

In mid-2016 Assad’s troops marched into the iconic revolutionary town of Darayya, one of the key centres remaining wedded to the ideals of the 2011 uprising. Thousands of residents still remaining after years of bombing, starvation and dispossession, but also heroic resistance, were deported to other parts of Syria.

While 748 barrel bombs were dropped on Darayya in June 2016 alone,<sup>[115]</sup> and the other Damascus suburbs were also being furiously bombed, besieged and starved, just a little to the south the once mighty Southern Front was forced to abide by the “ceasefire”.

Many popular forces demanded the SF reactivate the fronts against Assad. According to one pro-Islamist rebel declaration, “conspiracies against the Revolution can’t be foiled except by opening up the Damascus front. ... And Deraa [i.e. the SF] won’t act except with a “white/soft coup” against the MOC”.<sup>[116]</sup>

How this US/MOC intervention against the SF betrayed Darayya is explained by this piece that appeared just a few weeks before the surrender:

[T]he MOC summoned leaders in the Southern Front for an emergency meeting in which they were warned against launching an offensive to seize Sheikh Maskin, *a town lies along a motorway that run northward from Daraa's provincial capital toward Damascus...* The same month that the town fell into government hands, the MOC ordered the Southern Front to halt its operations against the Syrian regime in the Daraa province in order to focus its fight on ISIS-affiliated groups in the region.

[A]n official in Ahrar al-Sham issued a fiery warning to Free Syrian Army-affiliated rebels in southern Syria, saying they were *culpable for the regime's recent advances into the besieged western Damascus suburb of Darayya.*<sup>(117)</sup>

## Conclusion: CIA and Pentagon programs had same goal

To sum up, therefore, as with the CIA-program and the delivery of TOWs in the north, the much heralded CIA “support” to the once magnificent Southern Front turned out to be a long way round to the same goal as the Pentagon program: to end the rebel war against Assad and turn them into US proxies against the jihadists only. With results such as the crushing of two large FSA coalitions in the north, the demobilisation of the Southern Front, and the crushing of Darayya, *the CIA program was more effectively counterrevolutionary than the Pentagon program*, precisely because the latter could mobilise no significant forces (except the YPG) from the start.

So let's lay to rest the myth of the “anti-Assad” CIA program being at odds with the anti-ISIS Pentagon program.

## Return to the north: How does Euphrates Shield fit this picture?

Between the crushing of Darayya and the crushing of eastern Aleppo later that year, attention must swing back to the north. Does Turkey's Euphrates Shield operation fall within the “Sawhat” strategy?

Turkey's Erdogan regime had been one of the strongest supporters of the anti-Assad rebellion. While Turkey's anti-Kurdish policy is usually given as a main objective of its intervention in Syria, this explains little. Erdogan had a very strong relationship with Assad until 2011, and Assad could be relied upon to crush Kurdish Rojava once he crushed the rest of the rebellion; and until mid-2015, Erdogan had been involved in a half-hearted “peace process” with the PKK anyway.

But Turkey could not sit by as millions of refugees from Assad's slaughter poured across the border. Overwhelmed, Turkey's government eventually decided that the cause of this massive instability needed to be removed. And a regime pushing a soft-Islamist discourse at home and regionally allied to the Muslim Brotherhood would lose credibility if it ignored Assad's wholesale slaughter of mostly Syrian Sunnis.

Turkey initially put forward its plan to evict ISIS from Azaz to Jarablus in the northern Aleppo border region and set up a “safe zone” in mid-2015. Erdogan's plan was partly to relieve the refugee burden by allowing refugees to settle, safe from air strikes, in northern Syria. However, his alliance with the rebels, who were to patrol the zone, meant that Turkey's intervention threatened to go beyond its border issues, and provide back-up for the rebels war against the regime. Therefore this was rejected by the US, which insisted “there are no U.S. plans for a safe zone, a no-fly zone, an air-exclusionary zone, a humanitarian buffer zone or any other protected zone of any kind”.<sup>(118)</sup>

Yet in mid-2016, when Turkey launched the Euphrates Shield operation in alliance with FSA and Islamist militia to evict ISIS from the Azaz to Jarablus strip, it was supported by both US and even Russian airstrikes, even though its theoretically resolute anti-Assad policy clashed with both US and Russian objectives.<sup>[119]</sup>

Ironically, it was YPG actions that laid the basis of this US/Russian. In February 2016, the YPG seized a chunk of Arab-majority northern rural Aleppo from the FSA and rebel groups *with the direct aid of Russian air cover*, including the iconic revolutionary town of Tal Rifaat. This *cut rebel-held eastern Aleppo city off from rebel-held northern Aleppo regions around Mare and Azaz and from the Turkish border*.

So the Azaz-Mare rebels, squeezed between the Turkish border, the YPG to the west and south and ISIS-held northeast rural Aleppo, attacked east and seized the border town of al-Rai from ISIS.<sup>[120]</sup> Turkey meanwhile had been gathering rebels across the border to drive ISIS from Jarablus.<sup>[121]</sup> Turkey's decision to evict ISIS from this zone thus coincided with the need of the Azaz-Mare rebels to break their isolation.

However, because the YPG was occupying Tal Rifaat, and ISIS held al-Bab, *there was no route for the Turkey-FSA offensive to link up with and help defend fellow rebels in Aleppo city from Assad*.

Therefore, *as it had no way of fighting Assad*, this FSA operation against ISIS could gain both US and Russian support, regardless of the rebels' desires; they could support an "unintentional Sawhat".

However, for Erdogan it may have been less unintentional. Following the botched coup attempt in mid-2016, the AKP began moving in a more conventional Turkish nationalist direction, symbolised by its new alliance with the far-right Turkish-chauvinist MHP. This push into northern Syria offered this nationalist consensus an influence in this heavily Turkmen-populated region, an opportunity to block the YPG's threat to "link" its Kurdish cantons of Kobane and Afrin by seizing this non-Kurdish zone in between, and a potential zone to push Syrian refugees into<sup>[122]</sup> - while offering no danger of a clash with Assad.

This new Turkish policy made it easier for Erdogan to reconcile with Putin, and Turkey became a key partner, with Russia and Iran, in a new "peace process" launched in the Kazak capital Astana. For Russia, ensuring the process worked in the regime's favour involved facilitating Assad's victory in Aleppo, meaning the rebels entered the process drastically weakened.

The question then was whether Euphrates Shield weakened the rebels in the face of the decisive Aleppo showdown. One might argue that, given the Azaz-Mare rebels were already cut off from Aleppo, driving back ISIS was the best they could do, and did no harm to the Aleppo front.

However, Euphrates Shield not only involved the Azaz-Mare rebels, but also several thousand rebels Turkey had recruited from across its northwest border, from rebel-held Idlib and southwest rural Aleppo, while "60 percent of Turkmen fighters pulled out of Aleppo [city] in August to take part in Euphrates Shield".<sup>[123]</sup> This left east Aleppo drastically weakened when Assad reimposed total siege.

Accusations of Turkish betrayal came from various quarters. Abu Abd, the final leader of rebel forces in Aleppo city claimed that due to "the orders of the sponsor a lot of fighters from Aleppo left it to fight in the northern countryside;"<sup>[124]</sup> Ahmed Hussein, from Ahrar al-Sham, noted that despite the regime's "worst attack so far ... we have not received any significant support to counter them;"<sup>[125]</sup> while Abdul Ilah al-Fahed, the opposition National Coalition, claimed that "Aleppo's fall was facilitated in an international agreement".<sup>[126]</sup>



Possibly some of the rebels who moved north imagined that expelling ISIS from northeast Aleppo could open the front against Assad from the north. This would have required Euphrates Shield seizing al-Bab from ISIS, yet that operation only began once Aleppo was crushed. Whatever the subjective intentions of the rebels or Turkey, the effect was the same: Aleppo was abandoned.

Turkey was also abandoning traditional positions. Turkish leaders now stated their agreement with the US position that Assad could play a role in the “transitional government”,<sup>[127]</sup> a point on which they had previously differed. During the siege, Turkish leaders repeated the demand made by the US<sup>[128]</sup> and Russia that the rebels “separate themselves” from JFS and expel it from Aleppo.<sup>[129]</sup> Yet there were only 8-900 JFS fighters of the rebel force ten times that number in Aleppo, and were only inside the city at all due to their role in breaking Assad’s first siege of Aleppo from the outside. In the context of apocalyptic regime and Russia bombing, the demand to expel JFS was a demand on the rebels to weaken their own defences.

## Clashes between Syrian rebels and HTS jihadists early 2017

In this context of Euphrates Shield, the crushing of Aleppo, Astana, the intensified US war on Nusra, and Donald Trump’s new pro-Putin US administration, new clashes erupted between different groups of rebels in Idlib and western Aleppo in early 2017.<sup>[130]</sup> On one side was the new Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) alliance, formed by JFS (which split from al-Qaida in mid-2016) and four small rebel groups. On the other were the majority of rebel groups, including Ahrar al-Sham, which expanded as six moderate Islamist brigades joined it,<sup>[131]</sup> and the FSA.

These clashes did not last long; the need to avoid all-out conflict, in order to focus on Assad, the Russian and Iranian invaders and ISIS, reasserted itself. At the time, however, analyses of this conflict ranged from the idea that it represented a “new revolution against al-Qaida”,<sup>[132]</sup> to the claim that HTS was leading a struggle against rebel leaderships trying to end the revolution in the service of Turkey, Russia and the US.<sup>[133]</sup>

As we have seen, the struggle against Nusra/JFS in Idlib both by the FSA/rebels and popular struggle has been ongoing, sharpening with Nusra attacks on demonstrations bearing the flag of the revolution and on FSA Division 13 early in 2016.<sup>[134]</sup> This legacy lends legitimacy to the “new revolution” discourse.

Complicating this picture, however, was that Turkey’s Euphrates Shield operation was allied to a range of rebel groups *most of whose Idlib chapters were in conflict with JFS*, while Turkey was involved with the Astana process with Russia and Iran. Astana aimed to trap the opposition into accepting a “transitional” role for the Assad regime, while pushing them to turn *all their guns* against both ISIS and JFS: classic Sawhat.

After the Astana meeting of January 23-24, Russia, Turkey and Iran released a statement that “reiterate[d] their determination to fight jointly against ISIL/DAESH and Al-Nusra [i.e. JFS] and to separate from them armed opposition groups”.<sup>[135]</sup> According to one source, this clause “transformed the positions held by al-Nusra into a cake that the regime forces and opposition factions are trying to annex”.<sup>[136]</sup>

However, while taking part in the discussions, the rebel leadership resisted capitulation at Astana. Stressing they “were not party to this agreement”, the FSA’s Osama Abu Zaid noted that the “three countries can sign any agreements they want to”.<sup>[137]</sup>

The opposition delegation “refused to talk about confrontation with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in Syria,

before removing the foreign, “Iraqi, Afghan and Iranian” militias from Syria”.<sup>[138]</sup> Likewise, the Syrian Coalition stressed that only “areas controlled by the ISIS extremist group”, should be excluded from the ceasefire, i.e., not areas with JFS presence.<sup>[139]</sup>

The rebels also continued to reject any role for Assad in a “transitional” regime,<sup>[140]</sup> and declared their aims at Astana were to achieve basic preconditions for real negotiations, including the release of captives and an end to regime sieges.<sup>[141]</sup>

However, caught in a bind, the rebels abided by the ceasefire for the sake of the civilian population, despite its terms legitimising regime, Russian and US attacks on JFS-controlled territory; yet the Assad regime refused to abide by any ceasefire, and continued to furiously bomb East Ghouta and Wadi Barada.<sup>[142]</sup>

Furthermore, some statements from the exile-based Syrian Coalition were less principled than the rebels’ positions. For example, in one statement the Coalition called for “the formation of an international coalition to oust all terrorist organizations from Syria”.<sup>[143]</sup>

JFS began its attacks on rebel groups *that very week*; either JFS believed it had to pre-emptively attack the rebels before they coveted its territory, or could use this clause as a pretext to attack its adversaries.

Astana was in full accord with the US position. Over December 2016 and January 2017 the US stepped up its war against JFS, killing hundreds their cadres,<sup>[144]</sup> as well as allied fighters from the Nour ed-Din al-Zinki brigade,<sup>[145]</sup> and plenty of civilians, though it also bombed Ahrar al-Sham, JFS’s main opponent.<sup>[146]</sup>

Along with being the main target of US bombing, JFS was also the only significant armed group that opposed the Turkish intervention and Astana process.<sup>[147]</sup> Together with a small degree of moderation which has crept into its governance<sup>[148]</sup> and its discourse<sup>[149]</sup> since breaking with al-Qaida, this has allowed JFS to project itself as the only true “resistance” to Astana and capitulation.

## **Trump continues and intensifies the Obama-Kerry legacy**

While Trump’s Syria policy shows much continuity with the Obama legacy, his open praise for Putin’s and Assad’s alleged “fight against ISIS” suggested an even greater counterrevolutionary role for the US.<sup>[150]</sup>

Under Trump, the bombing of JFS in Idlib and western Aleppo reached its most horrific point with the slaughter of some 57 worshippers in a mosque in western Aleppo<sup>[151]</sup> – which Trump’s Russian friends defended as aimed at “terrorists”,<sup>[152]</sup> while the nature of the “war on ISIS” was highlighted with massacre of dozens of displaced people in a school in Raqqa,<sup>[153]</sup> and the mass killing of hundreds of civilians in Mosul.<sup>[154]</sup> Meanwhile, the US role alongside Assad, Russia and Iran in the latest reconquest of Palmyra was widely reported;<sup>[155]</sup> and a calculation US bombings in February from CentCom (i.e. the US-led Coalition bombing Syria) shows that while 60 percent were carried out in coordination with the SDF, most of the other 40 percent was in alliance with Assad in Deir Ezzor, Palmyra and Idlib, some 195 of the 548 strikes.<sup>[156]</sup>

Then in the very days before Assad’s chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun, three prominent US leaders announced that the US was “no longer” (sic) focused on removing Assad, whose “longer term status will be decided by the Syrian people”, but is for now “a political reality that we have to accept”.<sup>[157]</sup>

Assad mistook this encouragement to mean that even the use of sarin would pass, resulting in the first ever US strike on the regime, on the airfield from where the sarin was launched. After this singular US “credibility” strike on Assad – following 7,899 strikes on anti-Assad targets – all wings of the US leadership scrambled to emphasise that it was a one-off, that “we’re not going into Syria”, that it was only in response to sarin, that the US had no interest in Assad’s continued use of his other weapons of mass destruction, that defeating ISIS remains the priority, that tensions with Russia would “not spiral out of control”,<sup>[158]</sup> and that there was “no change in US policy”.<sup>[159]</sup>

National Security Advisor HR McMaster clarified that if there were any “regime change” it would be carried out by Russia, and that the US goal was limited to “a significant change in *the nature of the Assad regime* and its *behavior* in particular”.<sup>[160]</sup>

## Conclusion

It is not surprising that key revolutionary centres that continually resist the jihadists – Ma’arrat al-Numan,<sup>[161]</sup> Atareb,<sup>[162]</sup> Kafranbel, Darayya and so on – centres where revolutionary councils have been most successful, have been continually targeted by regime airstrikes.

It is also not surprising that the US again cut off its meagre “support” to the rebels *when the latest conflict erupted with JFS*, allegedly “to ensure that supplies do not fall into extremist hands”.<sup>[163]</sup> This may seem counterintuitive, given US pressure on the rebels to fight Nusra, but is logical when we remember that the rebels refused to drop the fight against Assad.

These facts indicate that both the US and Assad see the real revolution as the main threat, with “anti-jihadism” a useful propaganda device. But this regime, Russian and US bombing boosts the standing of JFS amid false ‘ceasefire’ processes. As Felix Legrand points out, “the very inverse dynamic” from that intended has resulted from these ceasefires, as Nusra/JFS “emerged indisputably strengthened *from the failure of the agreement* between the regime and the non-jihadist opposition”.<sup>[164]</sup> Because Assad continues to slaughter through the ‘ceasefires’, when the rebels try, for good reason, to respect them, JFS gains points as the “true resistance”.

A *genuine* ceasefire, especially one based on a more positive relationship of forces than at present, would aid the democratic revolutionary forces, because the jihadists thrive on military struggle; every time there is some lull in the fighting, the masses return to the streets with the flag and slogans of the revolution. A revival of the civil movement would provide a chance to overcome the sectarian atmosphere; massive slaughter is not conducive to rebuilding harmony.

At this point, the military side of the struggle appears to be largely lost; the long-term US drive to divert the revolution to the “war on terror” and other forms of sabotage, and the undermining of the struggle by other alleged foreign “friends”, alongside the massive Russian and Iranian intervention and the rise of ISIS, have all led to this point.

Of course, there is no military “solution” (and the arguments that some Syrians fear certain rebel formations “taking power” in Damascus are as unreal as fears of Hamas emerging from Gaza to rule in Tel Aviv). However, *the military balance on the ground* is a decisive factor: it is the difference between a ceasefire leading to a political arrangement in which the opposition can demand the release of political prisoners, the end of sieges, keeping their weapons, providing security and democratic governance to the areas they control and so on, compared to one in which the regime is able to deny these basics: in other words, the difference between a ceasefire that leaves the door open to non-military revolutionary possibilities and one that slams it fully shut.

At the same time, the severe political limitations of the opposition leaderships are also crucial

factors; the issue is not merely military. But it is beyond the scope of this article to analyse this question; the point here, however, is that the sabotage of the FSA's military position has also had profoundly negative impacts on *the relationship of political forces within the Syrian opposition*. It imposes a false choice between total capitulation, dressed up as the only acceptable form of "moderate" politics (so reminiscent of Palestine), and nihilistic rejectionism and jihadism as the face of "continuing the struggle".

Such an evolution of the political situation within the anti-Assad camp does not bode well for the revolutionary possibilities of a genuine ceasefire, even one based on a more favourable military balance than at present. However, from afar, we can do little but provide solidarity with both the military and political struggles that do presently continue, and not give up on the revolution while its sparks continue to rage throughout Syria, in some cases to amaze.

Read more on Syria by Michael Karadjis at his Syrian Revolution Commentary and Analysisblog.

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