



China, Central Asian states watch as US legitimizes Al Qaeda in Syria

Dr Christina Lin

August 2016

Abstract

Although a change in name of the terrorist group Jabhat al Nusra to Jabhat Fatah al Sham signifies nothing, Beltway pundits are pushing for arming and legitimizing various al-Qaeda groups under such nicknames to overthrow the Syrian government. Since 2015, Idlib and parts of Aleppo have become the base of anti-Chinese Turkistan Islamic Party and Central Asian jihadists and Nusra, which fights closely with them, is only seeking additional support from the US by the recent re-branding exercise.

About ISPSW

The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is objective and task oriented, and impartial to party politics.

In an ever more complex international environment of globalized economic processes and worldwide political, ecological, social and cultural change, that bring major opportunities but also risks, decision makers in enterprises and politics depend more than ever before on the advice of highly qualified experts.

ISPSW offers a range of services, including strategic analyses, security consultancy, executive coaching and intercultural competency. ISPSW publications examine a wide range of topics relating to politics, economy, international relations, and security/defence. ISPSW network experts have operated in executive positions, in some cases for decades, and command wide-ranging experience in their respective areas of specialization.

About the Author of this Issue

Dr Christina Lin is a Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations at SAIS-Johns Hopkins University where she specializes in China-Middle East/Mediterranean relations, and a research consultant for Jane's Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Intelligence Centre at IHS Jane's. She is the author of "The New Silk Road: China's Energy Strategy in the Greater Middle East" (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy), and a former director for China policy at the U.S. Department of Defense.



Christina Lin



Analysis

With Al Qaeda in Syria announcing its name change from Jabhat al Nusra to Jabhat Fatah al Sham and supposedly distancing itself from al-Qaeda, the excited US media, Beltway think tanks and State Department are now pushing full throttle to support this jihadi group to overthrow the Syrian government and establish an Islamic state under Shaira law.

CNN immediately gave airtime to the “reformed” al-Qaeda branch, angering many Americans who still remember the 9/11 attacks.¹

Moreover, counter terrorism expert Thomas Joscelyn at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies clarified that Nusra emir Abu Mohammad Jolani did not publicly break his *bay’ah*, or oath of allegiance to al-Qaeda.² Rather, he played with words and merely said Nusra would no longer affiliate to “any external entity”, and given “al-Qaeda has a senior leadership cadre and a roster of members inside Syria, al-Qaeda is not an ‘external entity’” in the country.³

Nonetheless, it seems Beltway pundits are already pushing for arming and legitimizing al-Qaeda groups under various nicknames, describing them as having “local prestige and goodwill”⁴ in Aleppo; proposing ways to protect them and finally bomb⁵ the Syrian army, and arguing “we need to be somewhat more willing to work with groups that are tainted by past association with the Nusra Front...We should give them anti-tank missiles — though not anti-aircraft missiles — and much more help in terms of ammunition, logistics assistance, and food, to help them build up their forces.”⁶

However, these proposals did not clarify why this is actually in the interest of US national security or protecting Americans. As a former CIA operative in charge of instigating the Syrian “civil war” back in 2012 admitted, there were no moderate rebels but US armed them anyway.⁷ Now, without a single exception, every armed group in Syria is committed to rule by Shaira law.⁸

If anything, the proposals would serve Saudi Arabia’s agenda to import its austere Wahhabism in the Arab Gulf to the Levant and Eastern Mediterranean, and empower radical Islamist groups in the Mideast to harm US national security as well as Eurasian stability.

US/Saudi air campaign in Yemen has already devastated the country and empowered Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and Washington is again illegally bombing Libya to fight the jihadists it supported from its bombing five years ago.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Foc3svRTsq> Vanessa Beeley, “Syria: CNN Normalizes Suicide Bombers and Embeds Reporters with ISIS and Al Qaeda”, *21st Century Wire*, August 4, 2016, <http://21stcenturywire.com/2016/08/04/syria-cnn-normalizes-suicide-bombers-and-embeds-reporters-with-isis-and-al-qaeda/>

² Thomas Joscelyn, “Analysis: Al Nusrah Front rebrands itself as Jabhat Fath Al Sham”, *The Long War Journal*, July 8, 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/analysis-al-nusrah-front-rebrands-itself-as-jabhat-fath-al-sham.php>

³ Daniel Wickham, “Al Qaeda in Syria: Can a jihadi leopard change its spots?” *International Business Times*, August 3, 2016.

⁴ <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/how-the-microcosm-of-the-syrian-war-was-encircled-2>

⁵ http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/03/opinion/the-case-for-finally-bombing-assad.html?_r=3

⁶ <https://www.brookings.edu/2016/08/01/what-to-do-when-containing-the-syrian-crisis-has-failed/>

⁷ Brad R Hoff, “The CIA’s top spy in Syria knew nothing about Syria”, *The Canary*, August 1, 2016,

<http://www.thecanary.co/2016/08/01/cias-top-spy-syria-knew-nothing-syria-video/>

⁸ <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/blame-syrias-nightmare-ehsani2/>

US/Saudi-backed Wahhabistan

It is also mind-boggling why Washington boasts US is a global leader in counter-terrorism while simultaneously stating it has no problem supporting jihadi groups that violate human rights and commit war crimes: chop off children's heads;⁹ use chemical weapons on civilians;¹⁰ oppress women; massacre Christians, Alawites, and other religious and ethnic minorities.

Nonetheless, State Department spokesman Mark Toner said 'one incident here or there' of beheading or chemical attacks will not stop Washington's funding of jihadi groups.¹¹

As such, the US seems intent on further allying with the Saudis to fortify the Salafist statelet/Wahhabistan in Syria as described in the 2012 Defense Intelligence Agency report.¹² Indeed, another US/Saudi backed al-Qaeda affiliate Ahrar al Sham's deputy leader, Ali Al Omar, singled out Afghanistan's Taliban as a model for Syria, describing them as "the blessed movement" and Taliban's dead leader Mullah Omar as "the happy emir."¹³

This plan can already be seen in Syria: in government-controlled-areas, women and religious minorities are still free,¹⁴ while rebel jihadists-held areas look like Afghanistan under Taliban rule.



The difference between "oppressed" West Aleppo and "liberated" East Aleppo



⁹ Katie Zavadski, "U.S.-Backed 'Moderate' Rebels Behead a Child Near Aleppo", *The Daily Beast*, July 19, 2016.

¹⁰ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/syria-armed-opposition-group-committing-war-crimes-aleppo-new-evidence>; <https://twitter.com/BBassem7/status/759428460162920448><http://www.activistpost.com/2016/06/new-chemical-weapons-attack-ghouta-syria.html>

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKxWTakMq7M> <http://m.state.gov/md260813.htm>

¹² <https://levantreport.com/2015/11/16/a-critical-examination-of-the-2012-dia-document-predicting-the-rise-of-the-islamic-state/> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ccdeANvo2bg>

¹³ Hassan Hassan, "Ahrar al Sham's leader clarifies its role in Syria", *The National*, May 29, 2016, <http://archive.is/GsFmr>

¹⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/flavius-mihaies/syrian-wedding-photos_b_8207150.html

If US and Saudi Arabia step up arming the re-branded Syrian al-Qaeda within the Jaish al Fatah (Army of Conquest) to take more territory, backed by a potential Clinton administration to overthrow the Syrian government and replace it with the Conquest army “opposition”, this would also further create a new tidal wave of Syrian refugees to destabilize Europe that is already reeling from the current crisis.

Syrian base for Chinese, Central Asian jihadists

Moreover, re-branding Al Nusra to procure additional US support will further empower the entire coalition of the Conquest Army, wherein Nusra (aka Jabhat Fatah al Sham) fights closely with the anti-Chinese Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) and other Central Asian jihadists.

It was in April 2015 that the coalition of rebel forces¹⁵ led by al Nusra, TIP, Uzbek-led Imam Bukhari Jamaat (IBJ) and Katibat Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) defeated the Syrian army at Jisr al-Shughur in northwestern Syria’s Idlib governorate.¹⁶ Seen in videos,¹⁷ then TIP spokesman Abu Ridha al-Turkistani¹⁸ led fighters to take over a building, and climbed a clock tower to plant a black-and-white al Nusra style flag on which “Turkistan Islamic Party” was written in Arabic.

Thus since 2015, Idlib and parts of Aleppo have become the base¹⁹ of Chinese and Central Asian jihadists especially from Uzbekistan. Known as the ‘Aleppo Uzbeks’, several thousand fighters from KTJ and IBJ have also aligned with al Nusra.²⁰ Now these ‘Aleppo Uzbeks’ and TIP are again taking part in the current Aleppo offensive, and are considered by some US scholars as effective military assets given “suicide tactics by JN [Jabhat al Nusra], Jund al-Aqsa, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement [ETIM/TIP], and other extremist groups are a serious threat to Syrian army operations in the northwest...As a result, the regime has had to divert troops from operations to retake and hold Palmyra, Deir al-Zour, and Tabqa [from IS].”²¹



¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHCi36E-vyQ#t=16>

¹⁶ Caleb Weiss, “Turkistan Islamic Party had significant role in recent Idlib offensive”, *The Long War Journal*, April 30, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/04/turkistan-islamic-party-had-significant-role-recent-idlib-offensive.php>

¹⁷ <http://jihadology.net/2015/05/01/%E1%B9%A3awt-al-islam-presents-a-new-video-message-from-%E1%B8%A5ibz-al-islami-al-turkistani-turkistan-islamic-party-in-bilad-al-sham-conquest-of-jisr-al-shaghur/>

¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEnv694zinM>

¹⁹ <http://atimes.com/2016/02/asian-rebels-in-aleppo-western-blind-spot/>

²⁰ USAID, Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses, May 4, 2015; Caleb Weiss, “Uzbek group pledges allegiance to Al Nusra Front”, *The Long War Journal*, September 30, 2015, “Central Asian fighters in Syria join al-Nusra Front”, *Middle East Eye*, September 23, 2015.

²¹ <https://twitter.com/Weissenberg7/status/760468740932825088>; <https://twitter.com/Weissenberg7/status/760212899990212608>; <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/shaping-u.s.-russian-cooperation-against-jabhat-al-nusra>

This is of great concern to Central Asian states and China, especially since TIP has released videos showing its arsenal of US anti-tank TOW missiles, tanks and other armaments captured from the Syrian army. Given the intermingling of Free Syrian Army with Al Qaeda groups and the sharing of weapons, now Aleppo Uzbeks and TIP likely also have access to anti-aircraft missiles, since their Conquest army²² claimed responsibility for shooting down the Russian helicopter over Idlib.²³



The last time a group splintered from al-Qaeda, it became Islamic State, thus understandably China is growing increasingly alarmed. Recently, Beijing lauded Britain for listing TIP as a terrorist group, and hopes the US would do the same.²⁴ Washington has listed ETIM but not TIP, due to initial discrepancy over whether they are the same entity.

However, given increasing Sino-US tension over the South China Sea and US intention “to work with groups that are tainted by past association with the NusraFront” such as TIP, IBJ and KTJ as assets for Syrian regime change, this remains to be seen.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article was first published by *Asia Times* on August 7, 2016.

²² <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/695315/Russian-helicopter-shot-down-Idlib-Syria>

²³ <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/tag/31.html>; <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/12/turkistan-islamic-party-claims-using-us-made-anti-tank-missile-in-northwest-syria.php>;

²⁴ “Michael Martina and Ben Blanchard, “Britain adds Chinese militant group to terror list”, *Reuters*, July 20, 2016.