# SYRIAN MODERATE COALITION FRACTURES — IS AL NUSRA THE NEXT MEK?

The US grand strategy of arming moderate groups within Syria's opposition in the ongoing civil war (remember, we only arm folks so moderate that they eat enemies' hearts) took a huge blow yesterday, as several groups previously aligned with the moderates threw their support into a group including the Islamist group Jabhat al Nusra, which has affiliations with al Qaeda. With the moderate coalition in disarray, it occurred to me to wonder whether al Nusra will now undergo a reputation-scrubbing and a lobbying campaign similar to that applied to MEK, which has been removed from the official list of terrorist organizations and continues to support US politicians who are willing to sell their services to any group with enough funding. There is hope for the future, though, as a UN treaty that would take significant steps toward stemming the flow of conventional weapons is gathering steam and has now been signed by more than half of the members of the UN.

The Washington Post brings us the news of the fractured moderate coalition:

> American hopes of winning more influence over Syria's fractious rebel movement faded Wednesday after 11 of the biggest armed factions repudiated the Western-backed opposition coalition and announced the formation of a new alliance dedicated to creating an Islamic state.
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> The al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, designated a terrorist organization by the United States, is the lead signatory of the new group, which will further complicate fledgling U.S. efforts to

> provide lethal aid to “moderate” rebels fighting to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The defecting groups are blaming the US for failing to come through with promised arms and for not bombing Assad after the August 21 chemical weapons attack:

> Abu Hassan, a spokesman for the Tawheed Brigade in Aleppo, echoed those sentiments, citing rebel disappointment with the Obama administration’s failure to go ahead with threatened airstrikes to punish Assad for using chemical weapons in the suburbs of Damascus last month, as well as its decision to strike a deal with Russia over ways to negotiate a solution.
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> “Jabhat al-Nusra is a Syrian military formation that fought the regime and played an active role in liberating many locations,” he said. “So we don’t care about the stand of those who don’t care about our interests.”

Toward the end of the New York Times story on this development, we see the al Nusra group being described as less radical than the new kid on the block, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS):

> Further complicating the picture is the rise of the new Qaeda franchise, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria — or ISIS, which has established footholds across northern and eastern Syria with the intention to lay the foundations of an Islamic state.
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> In recent months, it has supplanted Al Nusra Front as the primary destination for foreign jihadis streaming into Syria, according to rebels and activists who have had contact with the group.

> Its fighters, who hail from across the Arab world, Chechnya, Europe and elsewhere, have a reputation for being well armed and strong in battle. Its suicide bombers are often sent to strike the first blow against government bases.
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> But its application of strict Islamic law has isolated rebels and civilians. Its members have executed and beheaded captives in town squares and imposed strict codes, forcing residents to wear modest dress and banning smoking in entire villages.

Because there already have been clashes between ISIS and al Nusra, I would not be at all surprised by an effort being organized to claim that those al Nusra groups don't really mean their sworn allegiance to al Qaeda, especially since so many of the groups within that alliance previously were already described as our own moderates. Will al Nusra become the next MEK?

Remember that MEK was on the list of terrorist organizations even when we were training their operatives in the Nevada desert. Despite the fact that they were described in a Rand report in 2009 that "establishes its cultic practices and its deceptive recruitment and public relations strategies", MEK was able to whitewash itself by injecting large amounts of cash into the proper hands. Those public relations strategies paid off last year after the MEK finally bought off enough politicians to get the State Department to officially drop the terrorist designation.

Despite Iran electing a moderate President and making significant moves toward negotiating a peaceful end to the controversy over their enrichment of uranium, the MEK has not given up on its dreams of a violent overthrow of the Iranian government. They staged a "protest" Tuesday during which they attempted to paint Rouhani as violently repressive and even trotted out a number of their paid-for politicians,

including Rudy Giuliani, John Bolton and Michael Steele.

While the finger-pointing over who was responsible for the August 21 chemical weapons attack continues, the carnage in Syria shows little prospect of abating. With over 100,000 dead to date, conventional weapons have killed many more people than chemical weapons. Outside groups funding and arming various factions within Syria or sending in mercenaries fuel the killing. Fortunately, the UN is taking a significant step toward ending at least some aspects of this barbaric practice. From the New York Times:

> A pioneering United Nations treaty aimed at regulating the global trade in conventional weapons surpassed a symbolically important threshold on Wednesday when 18 countries, most notably the United States, officially signed the document, pushing the total number to more than half of the organization's member states.
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> The treaty, which took seven years to negotiate, is considered by rights advocates to be a landmark document that would for the first time impose moral standards on the enormous cross-border trade in conventional arms that fuel conflicts around the world, most notably in Africa. It is devised to thwart sales to users who would break humanitarian law, foment genocide or war crimes, engage in terrorism, or kill women and children.

John Kerry signed the treaty for the US yesterday. What could possibly stand in the way of Senate ratification?

> The National Rifle Association and other American gun-rights advocacy groups still object to the treaty, contending

> it infringes on the Second Amendment. They have vowed that it would never be ratified by the Senate, even though language in the final draft specifies that nothing in the treaty could infringe on any nation’s constitutional rights.

Keep it classy, NRA. Don’t let a little genocide bother your patriotic dedication to gun rights.