

CFR's Foreign Affairs Praises "Moderate" Al Qaeda

With al Qaeda now seen by the U.S. as likely the only group in Syria "militarily capable of challenging the Assad regime's grip on power, the U.S. is in the uncomfortable position of having to rehabilitate 9/11 and current terrorists into supportable "moderates."

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Last week, Foreign Affairs, self-described as the "leading magazine for analysis and debate of foreign policy," published an article titled "[The Moderate Face of Al Qaeda](#)." The piece takes note of the fact that al Qaeda's branch in Syria, long known as Jabhat al-Nusra or al-Nusra Front, changed its names numerous times in order to present itself as "moderate" in comparison to other terror groups operating in Syria, particularly Daesh (so called Islamic State).

Most [counter-terrorism and foreign policy analysts](#) noted at the time that al Qaeda-affiliated rebels' attempts at rebranding were intended to improve its chances of receiving funds from foreign governments and to protect itself from Syrian, Russian airstrikes by becoming part of the "moderate" opposition. Indeed, al Qaeda's name changes led the group — allegedly responsible for the 9/11 attacks and the ostensible justification for the U.S.' War on Terror — [to be dropped](#) from the U.S. and Canada's terror watch list.

However, Colin P. Clarke, the author of the *Foreign Affairs* article, takes a different approach, arguing that the rebranding "just might have worked" to redefine the once-reviled terror group "as a legitimate, capable, and independent force in the ongoing Syrian civil war" that is "dedicated to helping Syrians prevail in their struggle." He further argues that this "could spell a situation, at least in the long-term, in which al Qaeda begins to resemble the Lebanese group Hezbollah," a [legitimate political party](#) with a long history of fighting *actual* terror groups like al Qaeda and Daesh.

Clarke goes on to praise al Qaeda's "penchant for cooperation" and notes that "the group has even publicly announced that it will refrain from attacking the West" in order to focus "its finite resources on overthrowing the Assad regime" — which, according to Clarke, is the "top priority of Syria's Sunnis."

Though Clarke's words paint a picture of a "moderate" al Qaeda franchise, the evidence from Syria makes it clear that the group is still as extreme and abhorrent as ever. The war crimes of al Qaeda-affiliated rebels in Syria are numerous and well-documented. They have massacred civilian communities, [specifically targeting](#) religious minorities such as the Druze and Shia Muslims. Those who were permitted to live under al Qaeda rule [were subject to](#) stonings, amputations, floggings and worse for violating legal codes adopted by the group. A [recent massacre](#) of civilians, conducted by al Nusra and other al Qaeda affiliates in Syria, targeted evacuation buses of Shia civilians, killing over 200 innocents. The dead

included 116 children who were lured towards a bomb with the promise of food by terrorists affiliated with al Nusra.

Beyond this distorted depiction, Clarke's further suggestion that Syrian Sunnis are now inclined to support the group lacks factual basis. The Syrian people have been shown – over the course of the entire war – to [overwhelmingly support](#) Assad, effectively debunking the assertion that Assad's removal from power by Wahhabists is the “top priority” of all Sunnis.

In addition, the testimony of Syrian civilians, particularly in post-rebel occupied Aleppo, has revealed that Clarke's assertion that al Qaeda-affiliated rebels are committed to “working with locals” and possess “the resources necessary to provide the trappings of governance” is equally farcical. During the time they ruled over Eastern Aleppo, al Nusra and other rebels linked to al Qaeda [hoarded food and medicine](#), occupied hospitals and schools, and tried civilians in extremist Sharia courts, often sentencing them to solitary confinement, torture or execution. One young man was tortured for four hours and then executed because his mobile phone contained a picture of his friend holding a Syrian flag. The “moderate” al Qaeda, to which Clarke alludes, remains factually elusive.

Useful terrorists rechristened “moderate rebels”

Clarke is not just any political scientist. Indeed, Clarke is a political scientist [working at the RAND Corporation](#), an “objective,” U.S. government-funded think tank that [has long championed](#) the goals of the U.S. military-industrial complex of which it is part. Over the course of the Syrian war, the RAND Corporation [has backed regime change](#) as well as [the partitioning of Syria](#), a plan also promoted by the U.S. and Israeli governments.

The motivation behind this argument may be related to the collapse of regime-change efforts targeting the Syrian government. As Clarke notes:

Now that ISIS has lost its capital in Raqqa, al Qaeda may be the only group viewed as militarily capable of challenging the Assad regime's grip on power. And unlike ISIS, al Qaeda is perceived as working with locals and possessing the resources necessary to provide the trappings of governance.”

Given that [recent events have further exposed](#) the true, extremist face of the so-called “moderate” rebels, the U.S. and its allies still bent on Syrian regime change are stuck in the unfortunate spot of attempting to legitimize what Clarke calls the *only* group “militarily capable of challenging the Assad regime's grip on power.”

The timing of Clarke's piece is also notable, as it preceded statements made by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Tillerson [told reporters](#) last Thursday:

It is our view — and I have said this many times as well — that we do not believe that there is a future for the Assad regime and Assad family. The reign of the Assad family is coming to an end. The only issue is how that should be brought about.”

The only opposition force that stands to gain from regime change are the “moderate” al Qaeda-affiliated rebels, particularly since the Kurdish factions in control of the country's

north [have embraced negotiations](#) with Assad's government.

Thus, the time has now come to [once again](#) rehabilitate what is ostensibly one of the world's most notorious terror groups, even though it is this group's presence in other nations – such as Yemen, Niger and others – that is used as the pretext for U.S. military intervention and bombing campaigns. However, in Syria, al Qaeda, like Daesh, is [a useful tool](#) — as well as the last resort – for certain foreign governments in furthering the regime-change campaign against Bashar al-Assad — a campaign that, for six long years, has yielded little but the destruction of swaths of Syria and its civilian population.

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