

General Petraeus Calls for Recruiting Al Qaeda

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Last week, US officials once again marked the anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington with solemn speeches vowing a never-ending war on terrorism. President Barack Obama spoke to US troops at Fort Meade, Maryland about “significant threats coming from terrorist organizations and a terrorist ideology,” while US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter vowed at a Pentagon ceremony that “terrorists will not escape the long arm and the hard fist of American justice.”

Alongside this official 9/11 rhetoric, which grows more hollow with every passing year, a different discussion is taking place within the ruling political establishment and the military and intelligence apparatus. It centers on a proposal that Washington recruit factions of Al Qaeda—the group blamed for the attacks that killed nearly 3,000 14 years ago—as its proxy troops in a simultaneous war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

The point man for this scheme is David Petraeus, the retired four-star Army general who served as the director of the Central Intelligence Agency after postings as the US military commander in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

The attention given to Petraeus’ proposal is indicative of the continuing influence that he wields within US ruling circles, despite his sacking as CIA director over illegally passing binders filled with highly classified information to his biographer and mistress, Paula Broadwell. He received only a misdemeanor conviction and a sentence of a \$100,000 fine and two years probation for essentially the same offense for which Chelsea Manning was sentenced to 35 years in a military prison. Manning leaked information documenting war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq in which Petraeus himself was among those most directly responsible.

In recent weeks, Petraeus has confirmed the thrust of a story that first appeared on the DailyBeast web site, which quoted unnamed sources in Washington to the effect that the retired general “has been quietly urging U.S. officials to consider using so-called moderate members of al Qaeda’s Al Nusra Front to fight ISIS in Syria.”



Petraeus told CNN: "... it might be possible at some point to peel off so-called 'reconcilables' who would be willing to renounce Nusra and align with the moderate opposition (supported by the US and the coalition) to fight against Nusra, ISIL, and Assad."

In promoting his plan, Petraeus boasts about the supposed "success" of his "surge" policy in Iraq, which included the "peeling off" of Sunni elements that had fought against the US occupation, intimidating and bribing them into forming the "Sons of Iraq" militias to combat Al Qaeda in Iraq. In reality, the "Sons of Iraq" quickly disappeared after the US withdrew the bulk of its troops and with the relentless growth of sectarian tensions first fostered by the US occupation's divide-and-conquer strategy. Today, many of those who comprised the "Sons of Iraq" are part of ISIS.

Some media liberals have feigned shock at Petraeus' proposal to harness Al Qaeda to the US war wagon in Syria. In reality, the plan is fully in line with policies pursued both before and after 9/11 of using armed Islamist factions to advance US imperialist interests in the Middle East.

Al Qaeda itself was the product of the CIA-orchestrated war waged by the so-called mujahideen against the Soviet-backed government of Afghanistan that plunged that country into decades of war, costing millions of lives. Osama bin Laden worked closely with the CIA and its Pakistani and Saudi intelligence counterparts.

Well before that, US policy in the region was pursued through the support of Islamist elements as a counterweight to radical nationalist and socialist movements in the Arab world. Washington covertly funded and mobilized right-wing Islamists as a crucial component of the CIA-backed 1953 coup that toppled the Mossadegh government, which had nationalized Western oil interests in Iran, ushering in the Shah's 25-year dictatorship. In Egypt, it secretly supported the Muslim Brotherhood against the government of Col. Abdel Nasser, during the period when it nationalized the Suez Canal.

More recently, the Obama administration relied upon Islamist militias, including elements who had previously been targeted by Washington for their affiliation to Al Qaeda, as proxy ground troops in the 2011 US-NATO air war to topple the secular government of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya.

Fresh from its "success" in murdering Gaddafi, destroying Libya's government and plunging the country into bloody chaos that continues to this day, the White House and the CIA embarked on a similar venture in Syria, relying on similar elements.

Under the guiding hand of the CIA, Washington's key regional allies—Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar—funneled billions of dollars worth of arms and aid into the Al-Nusra Front, ISIS and other Islamist militias, which have, from the beginning, served as the main fighting force in the Western-backed war for regime change in Syria.

With the rise of ISIS and its offensive last year that routed the US-trained and armed security forces in Iraq, the policy of aggression and subversion pursued by the Obama administration in the region produced a debacle. Billions of dollars more worth of US weaponry fell into the hands of ISIS from the fleeing Iraqi troops.

The proposed turn to the Al-Nusra Front is a tacit admission that the so-called “moderate opposition,” touted for years by US officials, does not exist on the ground in Syria. The Pentagon's abortive attempt to arm and train “vetted” rebels has proven an unmitigated fiasco, with the handful sent back into Syria being routed and captured by Al-Nusra, to which they swore fealty. The only indigenous force that has effectively resisted ISIS, the Kurdish militias, have themselves become the principal target of Washington's main ally in the so-called war against ISIS, Turkey, which is concentrating its firepower on destroying them.

Petraeus is not alone in advocating a turn to Al Qaeda-linked elements to do Washington's dirty work in Syria. Robert S. Ford, the US ambassador to Syria from 2011 to 2014, drafted an article for Middle East Institute this summer calling for Washington to make an approach to Ahrar al-Sham (Free Men of the Levant) another Islamist militia with its roots in Al Qaeda.

Ford acknowledges that Ahrar al-Sham advocates “an Islamic state in Syria” and a “Sunni theocracy,” but claims that it has “ideological and political differences” with Al-Nusra and Al Qaeda. He admits that its record is “problematic,” with its fighters massacring Alawi civilians and desecrating Christian sites, but points in their defense to a propaganda video showing “its fighters visiting priests.”

Ahrar al-Sham's founders include Abu Khalid al Suri, who was designated as Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's representative in the Levant, and Abu Hafs al Masri, an Egyptian, who was a military commander and trainer for Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Both have been killed in the last year fighting with the militia.

The call by key men of the state like Petraeus and Ford for a more explicit turn to Al Qaeda-linked forces in Syria only underscores the complete fraud of the “war on terrorism.” It likewise points to the real aims of US imperialism in its current war in Iraq and Syria. Washington is fighting neither against terrorism nor for “democracy” and “human rights.” It is prosecuting another predatory war of aggression aimed at securing a US stranglehold over the Middle East and its vast energy reserves and thereby preparing for even more catastrophic conflicts with Iran, Russia and China.

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