

Syrian “Rebel” Factions Battle Each Other on Turkish Border

By [Bill Van Auken](#)

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Heavy fighting was reported Thursday between two factions of the Western-backed Syrian rebels around the northwestern town of Azaz on the Turkish border. The battle underscores the deep-going crisis of the US-backed war against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in the wake of the Obama administration’s calling off of planned military strikes in the face of massive popular opposition.

The violent clashes around Azaz have pitted fighters of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an Al Qaeda-affiliated group that originated in Iraq, against those of the Northern Storm brigade, a locally-based outfit that had been affiliated to the US-supported Free Syrian Army (FSA).

While the ISIS had previously driven the Northern Storm forces to the outskirts of the town, a cease-fire brokered by other anti-Assad militias had been in effect. The ISIS claimed that the rival force had broken the agreement by failing to turn over its heavy weapons.

The area is strategically vital as the bulk of weapons, financial aid and foreign fighters come across the border from Turkey, which has turned its territory into a rear base for the Islamist militias fighting in Syria. The ISIL fighters were reported to have overrun a number of border crossings. The group exerts control through terror, sending out death squads to execute members of religious minorities and anyone challenging them. It has also staged attacks on Kurdish villages.

In a previous round of fighting, the US State Department had defended the Northern Storm Brigade, which last May hosted a quick trip across the Turkish border by Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona, an advocate of increased US intervention. It represented the force as part of the Free Syrian Army and under the discipline of the Supreme Military Council, which was under attack by “extremists.”

However, on September 24, Northern Storm became one of roughly a dozen major “rebel” groups to announce that they rejected any authority of the Supreme Military Council and the exile-led Syrian National Coalition, the opposition front cobbled together by the State Department. Instead, the groups joined with the Al Nusra Front, another Al Qaeda-affiliated militia that Washington has classified as a foreign terrorist organization, calling for the imposition of an Islamist state based on Sharia law.

Since then, the disintegration has only accelerated, with another 50 groups operating around Damascus and in the southern governorate of Dera’a affiliating to the “Army of Islam” and repudiating the FSA command. Western sponsors of the bloody sectarian war for

regime change had long contended that the “extremists” were isolated to the country’s north, and that the “moderate” and supposedly secular rebels dominated in the south. This is now demonstratively not the case, and the FSA, the Supreme Military Council and the National Coalition are all exposed as empty fronts for US imperialism.

While some of these same groups have indicated hostility to the ISIS, there was no apparent move to come to defense of the Northern Storm brigade. This was attributable in part to local Muslim scholars designating the brigade as a “criminal” organization.

The Lebanese daily *As-Safir* provides a revealing portrait of these “moderate” rebels, embraced by both McCain and the Obama administration. The newspaper identifies the group’s founder as one Ammar al-Dadikhi, a tobacco smuggler known to have enjoyed “good” relations with Syrian security forces in the Turkish border region. While he did not participate in any of the demonstrations that took place in the first half of 2011, he was one of the first to form an armed group.

According to the report, al-Dadikhi’s group amassed significant resources by looting the property of other Syrians and through kidnappings for ransoms paid to a Swiss bank account in the militia leader’s name. It has also charged exorbitant “tolls” for trucks crossing the Syrian-Turkish border. It is most notorious for grabbing 11 Lebanese Shiite pilgrims in May 2012. Nine of them are still held captive.

According to *As-Safir*, al-Dadikhi was reported to have suffered a fatal wound from “friendly fire” last February. The paper, however, cites a source within Northern Storm who says that the death was faked. “He is moving on with his life, and his wealth was divided between himself and the brigade.”

The local population, unwilling bystanders to the armed conflict between Al Qaeda fanatics and vicious criminals, both backed by outside powers, only want them all to go away and leave them alone.

The *Washington Post* reported Thursday that, “The CIA is expanding a clandestine effort to train opposition fighters in Syria amid concern that moderate, US-backed militias are rapidly losing ground in the country’s civil war.”

These “moderates,” i.e., criminals like those of the Northern Storm brigade, “have been unable to mount a serious challenge to Assad or to match the growing strength of rival rebel factions that have hard-line Islamist agendas and, in some cases, ties to the al-Qaeda terrorist network,” the *Post* reports.

The Jordan-based training operation, nonetheless, remains “minuscule,” according to unnamed current and former intelligence officials cited by the *Post*, training just a few hundred fighters a month.

The *Post* reports that the effort has remained limited in part because the Obama administration’s strategy is “to provide enough support to help ensure that politically moderate, US-supported militias don’t lose, but not enough for them to win.” The aim is to create a “stalemate among the warring factions” that will keep bleeding Syria and create the conditions for Washington to ultimately step in and impose a settlement on the most favorable terms for US geo-strategic and economic interests.

According to the *Post*, the training operation is “led by small teams of operatives from the

CIA's Special Activities Division, a paramilitary branch that relies heavily on contractors and former members of U.S. Special Operations forces."

But according to the report, "Recruiting efforts by militias working with the CIA have sagged." It quotes an official who worked at the largest refugee camp in Jordan as saying that "Support to the rebellion is reducing."

Meanwhile, with fighting between rival factions of the so-called rebels erupting on the border, the Turkish parliament Thursday approved, over stiff opposition, a resolution extending an authorization for the government to send troops into Syria.

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Turkey's third-largest party, voted in favor, while the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) voted against.

Last year, the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan seized on the downing of a Turkish military plane by Syrian fighters and the killing of Turkish citizens by stray shells from the fighting inside Syria to push through the original resolution. This time around, it used the supposed threat posed by chemical weapons as the main pretext.

The CHP denounced the resolution as a "motion for war." "The AKP, wishing to continue its adventurous and irresponsible Syria policy, has brought our country to the brink of disaster," CHP leader Faruk Logoglu said in addressing the legislature. "We have become neighbors with the world's most dangerous terrorist group."

The BDP accused the government of protecting Al Qaeda and aiding it in attacks on the Kurds in Syria.

Erdogan's Syria policy, while approved by the parliament, is deeply unpopular. A recent opinion poll showed that over 72 percent of the Turkish population opposed any military intervention in Syria.

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Articles by: [Bill Van Auken](#)

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