
Britain's policy on Syria has just been sunk, and nobody noticed

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World View: The West's favoured faction is on the run, while the Riyadh-backed rebels steadily gain ground

The final bankruptcy of American and British policy in Syria came 10 days ago as Islamic Front, a Saudi-backed Sunni jihadi group, overran the headquarters of the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) at Bab al-Hawa on the Syrian side of the border with Turkey. The FSA, along with the Syrian National Coalition, groups that the United States and Britain have been pretending for years are at the heart of Syrian military and political opposition, has been discredited. The remaining FSA fighters are in flight, have changed sides, or are devoting all their efforts to surviving the onslaught from jihadi or al-Qa'ida-linked brigades.

The US and Britain stopped the delivery of non-lethal aid to the supply depot at Bab al-Hawa as the implications of the disaster sank in. The West's favourite rebel commander, General Salim Idris, was on the run between Turkey and his former chief supporter and paymaster, Qatar. Turkey closed the border, the other side of which is now controlled by the Islamic Front. The so-called moderate wing of the Syrian insurgency has very limited influence, but its representatives are still being urged by Washington and London to attend the peace conference in Geneva on 22 January to negotiate Bashar al-Assad's departure from power.

Confusion over what is happening is so great that Western leaders may not pay as much of a political price at home as they should for the failure of their Syrian policy. But it is worth recalling that the Syrian National Coalition and the FSA are the same people for whom the US and UK almost went to war in August, and saw as candidates to replace Assad in power in Damascus. The recent debacle shows how right public opinion in both countries was to reject military intervention.

Who are the winners in the new situation? One is Assad because the opposition to him - which started as a popular uprising against a cruel, corrupt and oppressive dictatorship in 2011 - has become a fragmented movement dominated by al-Qa'ida umbrella organisation the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isil); the other al-Qa'ida franchisee, the al-Nusra Front; and the Islamic Front, consisting of six or seven large rebel military formations numbering an estimated 50,000 fighters, whose uniting factor is Saudi money and an extreme Sunni ideology similar to Saudi Arabia's version of Islam.

The Saudis see this alliance as capable of fighting pro-Assad forces as well as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, but Riyadh's objections to the latter appears to be based on its independence of Saudi control rather than revulsion at its record of slaughtering Shia, Alawi, Christians, Armenians, Kurds, Turkomans or any dissenting Sunni.

The allegation of Saudi control is becoming easier to substantiate. Until a year ago, the Saudis stayed somewhat in the background when it came to funding the Syrian rebels, in which the leading role was played by Qatar in association with Turkey. But the failure of the rebels to win and US anger that the Qataris and Turks had allowed much of the aid to go to jihadis led

to an important change this summer, when Saudi Arabia took over from Qatar as chief supporter of the rebels.

An interesting example of just how hands-on this Saudi direction has become is illustrated by a fascinating interview given by a top defector from the FSA to Isil, Saddam al-Jamal. Commander of the Liwa Allah Akbar battalion, he was until recently the top FSA commander in eastern Syria, much of which is under rebel control. He recalls that 'we used to meet with the apostates of Qatar and Saudi Arabia and with the infidels of Western nations such as America and France in order to receive arms and ammo or cash'. He says Western intelligence operatives had of late been worried about the growing influence of al-Qa'ida affiliates and repeatedly asked him why he was growing a beard.

Jamal gives an account of a recent three-day meeting between the FSA commanders from northern and eastern Syria with Western, Saudi, Qatari, Emirati and Jordanian intelligence operatives. This appears to have been soon after the Saudis took over the Syria file from the Qataris. He says the FSA commanders, including General Idris, had a meeting with Prince Salman bin Sultan, the Saudi deputy defence minister who was the leading figure at the meeting. Jamal says that Prince Salman 'asked those who had plans to attack Assad positions to present their needs for arms, ammo and money'.

The picture that Mr Jamal paints is of an FSA that was a complete pawn to foreign intelligence agencies, which is one reason why he defected. The Saudis subsequently decided that the FSA would not serve their purposes, and were frustrated by America backing away from war in Syria and confrontation with Iran. They set about using their limitless funds to attract into alliances rebel brigades such as the Islamic Front which would be Sunni fundamentalist, committed to the overthrow of Assad, against political negotiations, but distinct from al-Qa'ida. In reality, it looks highly unlikely that Saudi money will be enough to bring down or even significantly weaken Assad though it may be enough to keep a war going for years.

The old, supposedly moderate, opposition has been marginalised. Its plan since 2011 has been to force a full-scale Western military intervention as in Libya in 2011 and, when this did not happen, they lacked an alternative strategy.

The US, Britain and France do not have many options left except to try to control the jihadi Frankenstein's monster that they helped create in Syria and which is already helping destabilise Iraq and Lebanon. Turkey may soon regret having given free passage to so many jihadi on their way to Syria. Ankara could close its 500-mile border with Syria or filter those who cross it. But Turkish policy in Syria and Iraq has been so dysfunctional in the past three years that it may be too late to correct the consequences of wrongly convincing itself that Assad would fall.

The Geneva II peace conference on Syria looks as if it will be born dead. In so far as the FSA and its civilian counterparts ever represented anyone in Syria they do so no longer. The armed opposition is dominated by Saudi-sponsored Islamist brigades on the one hand and by al-Qa'ida affiliates on the other. All US, British and French miscalculations have produced in Syria is a re-run of Afghanistan in the 1980s, creating a situation the ruinous consequences of which have yet to appear. As jihadis in Syria realize they are not going to win, they may well look for targets closer to home.

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