



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on December 11, 2012

U.S. to Recognize One Syrian Rebel Group, Blacklist Another

The Obama administration is expected to [announce](#) the recognition of the new Syrian opposition group, Syrian National Coalition, in the hope that it will expedite the fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The news will reportedly come Wednesday when American, European, and Arab diplomats meet in Morocco and will coincide with the U.S. blacklisting of a powerful rebel group in the region.



The *Washington Post* writes, “The action is part of a fast-moving diplomacy to try to guard against chaos and collapse in Syria if rebel forces succeed in ousting or killing Assad.”

According to the *Washington Post*, though the United States is recognizing the Syrian National Coalition, it will not go as far as naming it as the ruler of Syria, as that would provide the group some standing to ask for international military intervention. Rather, recognizing the coalition simply means that the State Department considers it to be the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

“What we want to do is use recognition as a way to demonstrate to them that we mean it when we say they have to stay organized,” said a senior administration official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. “We argue to ourselves that the more we demonstrate support for them, the more they’ll collaborate.”

The Syrian National Coalition (SNC) was created to replace the Syrian National Council. Syrian rebel Riad Seif declared that the Syrian National Council would not win the support of opposition leaders in Syria and therefore circulated his plan to create the Syrian National Coalition among opposition leaders. By October, the United States and European allies gave their support to the SNC. The new group was quickly recognized by France, Britain, Turkey, Spain, Italy, and the Persian Gulf Arab nations as well.

Meanwhile, U.S., European, and Arab security officials continue to work toward creating unity among the rebel military groups, and met for this purpose in Istanbul last week.

At the same time, the State Department has [designated](#) the leading Syrian militant group Jabhat al-Nusra as a global terrorist organization and an affiliate of al-Qaeda in an attempt to marginalize extremists within the opposition forces.

State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said that the group had claimed 600 attacks in a number of different cities over the course of the past year, including suicide bombings, and is responsible for the death of “numerous innocent Syrians.”

Al-Nusra “has sought to portray itself as part of the legitimate Syrian opposition while it is, in fact, an attempt by AQI [al-Qaeda in Iraq] to hijack the struggles of the Syrian people for its own malign purposes,” she said.

Because of the designation, it is now illegal for a U.S. citizen to provide “material support or



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resources,” including money, training, or weapons, to Al-Nusra.

But the endeavor to embrace any of the rebel forces while ostracizing others is a risky one.

According to a December 8 [report](#) in the *New York Times*, Jabhat al-Nusra is one of the “most effective fighting forces, posing a stark challenge to the United States and other countries that want to support the rebels but not Islamic extremists.”

The *Times* report continued:

Blacklisting the Nusra Front could backfire. It would pit the United States against some of the best fighters in the insurgency that it aims to support. While some Syrian rebels fear the group’s growing power, others work closely with it and admire it — or, at least, its military achievements — and are loath to end their cooperation.

And the move to blacklist the group has frustrated leaders of the Free Syrian Army, the umbrella rebel group that the United States has hoped to aid. Leaders see the Nusra Front as an ally in the rebellion.

The Nusra Front “defends civilians in Syria, whereas America didn’t do anything,” said Mosaab Abu Qatada, a rebel spokesman. “They stand by and watch; they look at the blood and the crimes and brag. Then they say that Nusra Front are terrorists.”

He added, “America just wants a pretext to intervene in Syrian affairs after the revolution.”

While the effort to marginalize the Nusra Front is intended to reject extremists and support moderates as the successors to the Assad regime, *The Pittsburgh Post Gazette* [notes](#) that the United States has already failed in doing that by arming Islamic extremists. The paper writes:

Knowing that probably most Americans, including in the Congress, would not want the United States to involve itself in the civil wars in either Libya or Syria to the degree that providing arms to one side or the other would have represented, the Obama administration decided instead to provide arms, or money or other materiel translatable into arms, to the Libyan and Syrian oppositions through third parties.

The instruments chosen were Sunni Muslim Persian Gulf monarchies Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. By involving them, the United States knew that it would be handing off to these countries the choice of recipients of the aid, including the arms. The CIA and the Defense Department were also — in spite of the holes in U.S. intelligence — fully aware that both the Libyan and Syrian opposition included Islamic extremists, with some groups affiliated with al-Qaida, even though their links to that organization might have been unclear.

In Libya the consequences of these decisions can already be seen, as extremist militias are well-armed and Libya is still in chaos. Most analysts predict that the situation in Syria will play out in much the same way.



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