

MEANWHILE, BACK IN SYRIA...

The last time I checked in on Syria, there was much consternation over the delays in getting Syria's chemical weapons precursors sent to the staging area in Latakia so that they can be moved on to the next steps in the process that will eventually result in destruction of the chemicals at sea aboard the Cape Ray. I had noted that stories covering the delay had put all of the blame on Syria for not moving the chemicals (even though they were said already to be at "marshaling" spots) while ignoring that the US was over a month late in making the Cape Ray ready. There has now been a third batch of chemicals sent to Latakia by Syria, but the amount shipped represents a small fraction of the materials to be removed. Despite this, Syria still maintains that the the June deadline for full destruction of the materials will be met.

Going further back, recall that back in September, we were hearing about how wonderful General Salim Idriss is. We were told that he was a moderate (well, that is if we ignore the fellow from his forces who eat hearts of dead foes) and that he had a foolproof plan for maintaining control of arms we shipped to him. It turns out that Idriss wasn't much of a leader after all. Idriss now has been removed:

The sudden replacement of the Free Syrian Army commander is the strongest sign yet that the rebel group is restructuring to address concerns of its Western backers that it fight both the regime and extremist opposition factions.

Gen. Salim Idriss, the public face of the FSA for the past 14 months, leaves ahead of an expected delivery of new and more sophisticated weapons from Gulf Arab states to rebels aligned with his group.

Complaints against Gen. Idriss have been mounting for some time. His critics said his forces were ineffective and he was too slow to deliver weapons to fighters.

It's all about the weapons when it comes to "aid" for the Syrian rebels. And Idriss' control of those weapons? How about this in The Guardian's coverage of Idriss' sacking:

The Islamic Front recently seized weapons warehouses from the FSA.

Gosh, I sure hope Idriss got the Islamic Front to give him a handwritten receipt for those weapons.

But did you notice that bit in the quote above from the Wall Street Journal article, where we learn that Idriss' removal comes "ahead of an expected delivery of new and more sophisticated weapons from Gulf Arab states"? Iran explains to us in a Fars News article that this really means the weapons will come from Saudi Arabia:

Saudi Arabia is reportedly to provide more than 3,000 tons of heavy arms to the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA).

The Saudi government has agreed to do so following a decision by the FSA governing body, the Supreme Military Command, to replace the forces' overall commander Selim Idriss, the DPA reported on Tuesday.

The kingdom had reportedly suspended its military aid to the Free Syrian Army in November 2013 to protest the way that Idriss had distributed arms from western countries and Persian Gulf Arab states.

"Idriss was identified as someone we could not work with and we made the strategic decision to suspend all support to the Free Syrian Army until it changed its leadership," Saudi Arabia's diplomatic liaison to the FSA said.

“Now we can resume arms supplies in full and as fast as possible,” said the official, who did not wish to be named as he was not authorized to speak to the press.

It’s not just Iran that sees the hand of Saudi Arabia in this move. From the Washington Post (after referring to the breakdown, yet again, of peace talks):

Even before the talks were suspended Saturday, Syrian opposition leader Ahmad al-Jarba, who has close ties to Saudi Arabia, had been signaling his intent to refocus on the military struggle against Assad by visiting the front line and promising rebel leaders that new weapons are on the way.

“You will get weapons, including quality weapons,” he said during a videotaped visit on Friday to Jamal Maarouf, an increasingly powerful rebel commander in the northern province of Idlib.

Several rebel commanders at Sunday’s meeting said Idriss had been replaced at the insistence of Jarba, who wanted to see a more effective leader in place ahead of the arms supply, which the Wall Street Journal reported on Saturday will include antiaircraft weapons.

Perhaps Bandar saw his opportunity in the spate of bad press on Syria’s horrific behavior in Homs, where there were attacks on UN relief convoys (although each side blames the other for the attacks, the fact that people are starving in Homs is undoubtedly the fault of Assad’s regime) trying to get into Homs. Then, Syria arrested hundreds of military age males who were attempting to evacuate, even though there were claims they were civilians and not fighters:

During the six-day mission that began

Friday and ended Wednesday night, Syrian authorities arrested several hundred men aged 16 to 54 as soon as they were taken out of the old quarter of Homs. They were among some 1,500 people evacuated, many of them frail and starving after more than 18 months under a government siege that prevented food from going into the zone.

All the detainees were presumed by the regime to be rebel combatants. But about 70 of them were freed after signing a pledge never to bear arms against the state.

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Fighters and activists inside the old quarter reached by Skype said most of the men who left were civilians trapped by the siege and none of them was a full-time combatant.

Gosh, I wonder where Assad could have gotten the barbaric idea that all military aged males in an area must be enemy combatants?

And so the US conundrum continues. In Syria, we are aligned with Saudi Arabia against Iranian (and Russian) support of Assad. This latest move there looks to be a loosening of the reins on Saudi support of the rebels to push back against apparent strategic gains by Assad's forces. But when it comes to the P5+1 talks with Iran, the US (and with Russia on its side this time) seeks agreement with Iran while Saudi Arabia is stridently opposed to any agreement. It looks as though peaceful outcomes on both these fronts will require a nearly miraculous level of diplomacy.