

'I am not fighting against al-Qa'ida... it's not our problem', says West's last hope in Syria

Source: [The Independent](#)

The rebel leader touted as the West's last hope to stem the tide of extreme jihadist groups in Syria has said he will not fight against al-Qa'ida, and openly admits to battling alongside them.

Speaking from a safe house on the outskirts of the Turkish town of Antakya, Jamal Maarouf, the leader of the Syrian Revolutionary Front (SRF) told *The Independent* that the fight against al-Qa'ida was "not our problem" and admitted his fighters conduct joint operations with Jabhat al-Nusra – the official al-Qa'ida branch in Syria.

The admission could have significant implications for Western involvement in the Syrian conflict. While the US and UK have been vocal in their support for rebels fighting to remove President Bashar al-Assad, they have been reluctant to follow through with material support – such as heavy weaponry – over fears it would fall into the hands of extremist groups who might target the West.

Maarouf and his brigades are viewed as relative moderates in a loosely affiliated rebel army that is increasingly dominated by radical groups, and the SRF and similar groups are presented as the West's best bet to fight both the Assad regime and extremists. His willingness to work with rebel groups the West deems unpalatable is a symptom of a war in which allegiances frequently change and all actors within it

have been forced to compromise in order to survive.

Western support for Maarouf and other moderate rebel groups reached a high point earlier this year, when the SRF was the recipient of significant aid from the US and its allies in order to fight the ultra-extremist and one-time al-Qa'ida affiliate Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis).

With help from the Salafi Islamic Front and Aleppo-based Islamist Army of the Mujahedin, the SRF has forced Isis to retreat to its stronghold in the Aleppo provincial city of Raqqa, to Jarabulus on the Turkish border and to the Iraqi border.

But while Maarouf and his men were happy to fight Isis, a group of predominantly foreigners, he said he would not go after Jabhat al-Nusra. "It's clear that I'm not fighting against al-Qa'ida. This is a problem outside of Syria's border, so it's not our problem. I don't have a problem with anyone who fights against the regime inside Syria," he said.

Maarouf admits to fighting alongside Jabhat al-Nusra – one example being the offensive against Isis, whose brutal tactics were deemed too violent even for al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.

While Maarouf maintains that their military supplies are too few to share, he cites the battle of Yabroud, against the regime, as an example of how his group shared weapons with Jabhat al-Nusra.

"If the people who support us tell us to send weapons to another group, we send them. They asked us a month ago to send weapons to Yabroud so we sent a lot of weapons there. When they asked us to do this, we do it."

Maarouf, a 36-year-old former construction worker, is a rare breed among rebel leaders affiliated with the official opposition in that he still fights on the front line to

command his troops, which he claims number 24,000.

The past 20 days, however, he has spent in Turkey and away from the front – keeping a low profile for fear of assassination by Isis. His makeshift base in Antakya is buzzing with commanders on leave – one grizzly man in a grey tracksuit is introduced as having come directly from leading the SRF's efforts in a new offensive in Latakia.

Maarouf's importance to the Western-backed opposition-in-exile – the Syrian Opposition Coalition – was clear to see in February, when its leader, Ahmad al-Jarba, paid a rare visit to the front line under the protection of Maarouf's brigades. He was also among the few commanders that attended the failed Geneva II conference in January, in an attempt to grant the political opposition greater legitimacy among Syrians, who have largely dismissed the body as unrepresentative of the Syrian people.

It has been unclear up to now how far Maarouf would be willing to fight for Western interests in Syria and there is little reason for the US to continue to fund a group that fights alongside al-Qa'i da.

"Funds are currently being funnelled to fight Isis as they are the greatest threat," says Barak Barfi, a research fellow for the New America Foundation. "While nobody is funding the Nusra Front directly, they need them to fight Isis. By supporting the other groups, the weapons find their way to them."

Maarouf denies receiving strong support from the US, citing a one-time \$250,000 payment for salaries and benefits of a shared operations room in Jordan to fight the Southern Front. "We have received lots of promises from the US, but so far nothing more," he said.

Though he has won respect for his battlefield exploits, Maarouf has also gained a reputation as a war profiteer. According to Dr Amr al-Azm, a member of the Syrian opposition,

he is simply one of the last men standing for the moderates. "He does have an unsavoury reputation, but it's a bit better than a lot of the other war lords out there. The rest are either dead, given up or completely bad and have gone over to the dark side," he said.

The balance between remaining palatable to the West and also to the civilians and Islamist brigades it fights alongside is a difficult one to strike for Maarouf.

Alaa al-Sheikh, Maarouf's 27-year-old adviser and Saudi-based co-ordinator, insists the SRF prefers to get its funding from Saudi Arabia, so they are not seen as US lackeys.

"If we get support from the US, then people will say we are sahwat", says al-Sheikh. Sahwat is a derogatory term used in reference to a group of Sunni tribesmen in Iraq who joined forces with US troops and rebelled against al-Qa'ida from 2006 to 2009. Al-Sheikh insists Jabhat al-Nusra and its members are "brothers".

To many civilians in opposition areas, however, there is no dilemma. Jabhat al-Nusra has widespread popularity – not for its ideology per se, but for its reputation on the battlefield, as well as being composed mostly of Syrians.

It is a sentiment reflected by the political opposition, who are unable to disassociate from Jabhat al-Nusra, given their power on the ground. While the US continues to hesitate to fully arm the opposition, the alliance will continue to present an awkward situation for Washington.