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U.S.-backed Syrian rebels being shoved aside by radical Islamists

By Roy Gutman

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There's hardly a more sensitive topic in Syria's eastern provinces than the standoff between the U.S.-backed Free Syrian Army rebels and the Islamist militants who run much of the region, so it was no surprise that the commander of the Free Syrian Army unit in eastern Syria's biggest town understated the state of play when he was asked earlier this summer.

"There are no tensions," said Abu Tayf, a former businessman who asked to be called only "Tayf's father." "We all still have one goal: to get rid of Assad," a reference to Syrian President Bashar Assad. The reason that black flags, the symbol of Islamist fighters, are flying in the town is that "the international community has let the Syrian people down," he said, and "they became desperate."

Five days later, militants kidnapped Abu Tayf while he was out in the city. He hasn't been seen since. Then on Aug. 13, a car bomb was detonated in front of the headquarters of his Ahfad al Asoul brigade. Those who weren't killed by the blast were arrested, according to locals.

What happened in Raqqa, the first provincial capital to be taken over by the rebels, is now being played out across northern and eastern Syria after an al Qaida affiliate, the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (Sham is the general area that includes Syria), declared war on the Free Syrian Army.

On Wednesday, extremists captured the north Syrian town of Azaz, killing eight Free Syrian Army troops and support personnel and effectively blocking a primary supply route from the nearby Turkish border to Free Syrian Army forces in Aleppo. Turkey closed the border crossing Thursday, while Free Syrian Army forces battled to regain control.

Fierce fighting also was reported in Deir el Zour, close to the Iraqi border, where extremists reportedly captured a number of Free Syrian Army fighters.

The confrontation had been growing all summer between the Islamists, who took control of large parts of eastern Syria early this year, and the Free Syrian Army, which has been begging the U.S. for arms so it can seize territory from the Assad regime and displace the radicals.

The three Islamist groups that run Raqqa – Ahrar al Sham, Jabhat al Nusra, which is also known as the Nusra Front, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham – claim that the Free Syrian Army leadership here received funds from France to fight the militants. Free Syrian Army supporters say that what really happened is that Abu Tayf and his colleagues persuaded the “prince” in charge of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham, which has many foreign volunteers, to join the Nusra Front, a group that Syrians claim, despite its al Qaida loyalties, has less foreign influence. That angered Islamic State leaders, who then kidnapped Abu Tayf, they theorize.

The distrust runs both ways. Two Free Syrian Army commanders insisted to McClatchy that the Islamists aren’t fighting the Syrian regime but working with it, a charge that sounds somewhat implausible but for which they offer circumstantial evidence. Why else, they say, would Raqqa, which once had a population of 220,000, have fallen to jihadists without much of a fight? And why haven’t the jihadis attacked a Syrian army base that’s just outside the city?

One of the commanders, who asked to be identified only as Abu Sayaf, said he’d served in Assad’s security services for 10 years in northeast Syria’s Hasaka province and had watched closely as the regime trained Kurdish rebels to mount operations against Turkey in support of a separatist Kurdish state. He has a sour personal relationship with the Islamists, who he said twice had threatened to kill him.

Abu Sayaf claims that the Syrian intelligence service had recruited most of the leaders of the Islamist groups to fight U.S. forces in Iraq. When they returned to Syria after the U.S. withdrew from Iraq at the end of 2011 – by then, the Syrian conflict had been raging for nine months – the government imprisoned them, fearing they were sympathetic to the anti-Assad uprising. “The government turned them in prison. They started to work for the regime” again, he insisted. He now claims that all but a few are working with the regime. “They get their orders and the timing of their operations from Damascus,” he said.

He also claims that recent fighting between the Kurdish Democratic Union and the Islamists was a sham by two government-allied organizations to keep the Free Syrian Army “from gaining ground.”

The other Free Syrian Army leader, Abu Hadi, 40, the deputy commander of the unit in Deir el Zour, offers similar allegations. The main evidence he cited for the Islamists working with the

regime was that Nusra and other Islamic extremists refuse to fight with the Free Syrian Army to capture the city of Deir el Zour, which, along with the airport and a military base, remains under government control. Rebels control the area east of the Euphrates River, including key oil and natural gas fields.

“At first, they fought with us, but not anymore. Now they just go to where there are (mineral) resources,” Abu Hadi said.

Abu Hadi admitted that he was one of many in the area attracted to the Islamists because of their call for the introduction of Islamic law. He said he still favored a far bigger role for religion in a post-Assad Syria. But he became disenchanted when he saw the way the Islamists treated the residents of some of the areas they controlled.

“At first, people were attracted to them. But they were using religion as a cover. Now people realize they are using religion as a means of terror,” he said.

There’s little doubt that the Islamists are far better equipped than the Free Syrian Army. Fadel Abdullah, the commander of the Al Khadisy brigade in Deir el Zour, said he had 402 men, but they have among them only 100 mostly light weapons – semiautomatics and rocket-propelled grenades -- and must share them in shifts. He’s certain he could raise a far bigger force if he had the weapons.

“Everyone wants to fight,” he said. “The problem is not with the human resources. The problem is with arming them.”

So far they’ve received only one shipment from the U.S.-backed Supreme Military Council: 10,000 rounds of ammunition that on the local market are worth about \$1.60 each.

Right now, though, they’re badly outgunned by the Islamists, who control the oil fields outside Deir el Zour as well as much of the region’s food and agriculture facilities. Nusra made \$40 million off the sale of heavy construction equipment it captured when it overran government facilities.

“If we had more supplies, we could control the entire region again,” Abu Hadi said. “If we were better armed, the people in Hasaka and Raqqa would realize that they want to be with us.”