



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on May 31, 2013

Oops! Sen. McCain Met Syrian Rebels Accused of Kidnapping

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz., shown) and his goal of openly intervening in the Syrian conflict on behalf of the foreign-backed rebels — [many of whom openly fight under the banner of al-Qaeda](#) — suffered a major setback this week after a public relations stunt backfired in spectacular fashion. Media reports that surfaced Thursday claimed some of the opposition fighters he met and posed for pictures with during a recent trip to Syria were actually extremists. In fact, the radicals are accused of kidnapping Lebanese pilgrims from a village in Aleppo province.



The news, first reported by [Al Jadeed](#) and [The Daily Star](#) newspaper in Lebanon, sparked widespread ridicule and criticism of the senator as his office scrambled to deal with the embarrassing negative publicity. It also further confirmed long-held suspicions among lawmakers and analysts that, contrary to claims made by Sen. McCain and others pushing for another open U.S. war in the Middle East, rebel forces might be just as bad as the Assad regime — maybe worse.

Sen. McCain, who is often at odds with his party and is regularly derided by conservatives as a “RINO,” sneaked across the border into Syria to give Western-backed rebel fighters a quick PR boost. He was also hoping the trip would help build support for overt U.S. intervention on behalf of the opposition, which continues to come under fire worldwide. Among the criticism: [human rights abuses](#), [firing on civilian protesters](#), [cannibalism](#), [massacres](#), [using chemical weapons](#), [deep ties to terrorist groups](#), [Islamic extremism](#), [openly announcing an ethnic cleansing program aimed at Shia Muslims](#), [mass-murdering Christians](#), and more.

McCain has long been claiming that the U.S. government would be able to identify and vet the “good” elements among opposition fighters before overtly sending heavy military weapons. In an ironic twist, however, even his own staff was apparently unable to do so. According to the Lebanese paper, among the rebels whom Sen. McCain met were men identified by two survivors as kidnapers involved in holding Shia pilgrims hostage.

One image of the senator, for example, reportedly featured Mohammad Nour, fingered as the top spokesman and photographer for the Northern Storm brigade (Asifat al Shamal) responsible for the kidnappings. Another man who reportedly met with McCain, Abu Ibrahim, was also implicated by freed hostages as part of the kidnapping operation. Some non-governmental organizations involved in the senator’s trip are now [claiming](#) that Ibrahim may be dead, but the brigade’s supposed new leader did indeed meet with McCain, the groups admitted.

Other news reports, however, say Ibrahim is actually still the commander of the kidnapping rebel brigade in question. The group, which McCain met with in Syria, according to organizers, has been



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holding nine hostages for over a year amid intense negotiations. The two who were released are confident that the man pictured with McCain was indeed among the kidnappers.

“I recognized him immediately,” Anwar Ibrahim, one of the kidnapping victims who was finally released last year, was [quoted as saying](#) by *The Daily Star*. “He was the photographer who was brought in to take our photos [during captivity]. He works with the kidnappers. He knows them very well ... I don’t know anything about why McCain was visiting, or what he wanted, but I was very surprised to see [Mohammad Nour] there.”

In [widely quoted statements](#) to the media, a spokesman for Sen. McCain was in full damage-control mode. “In coordination with the Syrian Emergency Task Force, Senator John McCain traveled to and from Syria with General Salim Idris, the chief of staff of the Supreme Military Council of the Syrian opposition, to meet with two senior Free Syrian Army commanders,” spokesman Brian Rogers explained. “None of the individuals the Senator planned to meet with was named Mohamad Nour or Abu Ibrahim. A number of other Syrian commanders joined the meeting, but none of them identified himself as Mohamad Nour or Abu Ibrahim.”

According to McCain’s spokesman, the U.S.-based “Syrian Emergency Task Force” echoed his claims, saying the Sen. McCain did not go to Syria to specifically meet with any rebels named Mohamad Nour or Abu Ibrahim. The group, which helped coordinate the senator’s half-baked publicity stunt, also said that two of its members were present at the meeting and confirmed that none of those in attendance identified themselves as the kidnappers in questions. However, if McCain really did meet and pose with kidnappers, that would be “regrettable,” Rogers continued.

“A number of the Syrians who greeted Senator McCain upon his arrival in Syria asked to take pictures with him, and as always, the Senator complied,” the spokesman [added](#). “If the individual photographed with Senator McCain is in fact Mohamed Nour, that is regrettable. But it would be ludicrous to suggest that the Senator in any way condones the kidnapping of Lebanese Shia pilgrims or has any communication with those responsible. Senator McCain condemns such heinous actions in the strongest possible terms.”

While the news has been picked up by media outlets and [wire services](#) worldwide, McCain’s spokesman tried, indirectly at least, to pin the blame for the scandal on Assad supporters. “It’s not surprising that the pro-Hezbollah forces supporting the Assad regime who originally promoted this distortion would seek to smear anything and anyone supporting the Syrian opposition,” Rogers said, apparently referring to one of the first sources to report the news, Al Jadeed.

Still, despite the embarrassing scandal and the [increasingly horrifying reports](#) about Syrian rebel atrocities, McCain is standing firm. “The senator believes his visit to Syria was critical to supporting the many brave Syrians who are fighting for their lives and the freedom of their country against a brutal regime and its foreign allies that are massacring Syrian citizens on Syrian territory,” his spokesman added. The foreign allies of the regime include the Russian government and the Iranian regime.

McCain and other pro-war politicians in Congress have been loudly demanding even more overt intervention on behalf of the rebels. President Obama and his administration, meanwhile, have been quietly helping to [arm, fund, and train the rebels](#) virtually from the start. Of course, WikiLeaks documents showed that the opposition has been receiving U.S. tax dollars since before the armed uprising even began. But certain elements in Congress want more.

As was [the case in Libya](#), the U.S. government and its allies among Western powers and Sunni Arab



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dictatorships appear to be hoping to topple the regime without having to put “boots on the ground.” The primary tactic has been the use of “rebels,” many of whom are [foreign mercenaries](#) openly [fighting for al-Qaeda](#) and the [imposition of sharia law](#) after the dictator falls.

Even the Free Syrian Army (FSA) rebel alliance, touted by McCain and others as the “good guys,” [recently announced an ethnic cleansing program](#) aimed at exterminating Shia Muslims and especially members of the Alawite faith. [Christians are also in the crosshairs](#), with news reports this week saying that [an entire Christian village was massacred by rebels](#).

In recent months, as *The New American* has been reporting since 2011 when the “revolution” began, the truth about the Islamist rebels has been more widely reported. The facts paint a very different picture than what McCain and his allies are spouting, and some lawmakers have urged caution. Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), for example, recently blasted his colleagues on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee [for voting to support arming the allies of al-Qaeda](#).

While McCain’s propaganda stunt may have backfired, the gruesome war in Syria marches on, pitting Islamist rebels against a brutal but secular dictator who protected minorities. Estimates suggest as many as 100,000 people have already been killed, with another 1.5 million being forced to flee the country so far. Why American policymakers would seek to pour fuel on the fire by deepening U.S. involvement remains unclear. The death toll, however, will undoubtedly continue to soar.

Photo of Sen. John McCain: AP Images

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