

# Down the Memory Hole: NYT Erases CIA's Efforts to Overthrow Syria's Government

By [Adam Johnson](#)

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*FAIR has [noted before](#) how America's well-documented clandestine activities in Syria have been routinely ignored when the corporate media discuss the Obama administration's "hands-off" approach to the four-and-a-half-year-long conflict. This past week, two pieces—one in the [New York Times](#) detailing the "finger pointing" over Obama's "failed" Syria policy, and a Vox "[explainer](#)" of the Syrian civil war—did one better: They didn't just omit the fact that the CIA has been arming, training and funding rebels since 2012, they heavily implied they had never done so.*

First, let's establish what we do know. Based on multiple reports over the past three-and-a-half years, we know that the Central Intelligence Agency set up a secret program of arming, funding and training anti-Assad forces. This has been reported by major outlets, including the [New York Times](#), [The Guardian](#), [Der Spiegel](#) and, most recently, the [Washington Post](#), which—partly thanks to the Snowden revelations—detailed a program that trained approximately 10,000 rebel fighters at a cost of \$1 billion a year, or roughly 1/15th of the CIA's official annual budget.

In addition to the CIA's efforts, there is a much more scrutinized and far more [publicized](#) program by the Department of Defense to train "moderate rebels," of which only a few dozen actually saw battle. The Pentagon program, which began earlier this year and is charged with fighting ISIS (rather than Syrian government forces), is separate from the covert CIA operation. It has, by all accounts, been an abysmal failure.



The New York Times depicts a sad Obama to accompany its story claiming that he trained Syrian rebels against his better judgment. (photo: Manuel Balce Ceneta/AP)

One thing the DoD's rebel training program hasn't been a failure at, however, is helping credulous reporters rewrite history by treating the Pentagon program as the only US effort to train Syrian rebels—now or in the past. As the US's strategy in Syria is publicly debated, the CIA's years-long program has vanished from many popular accounts, giving the average reader the impression the US has sat idly by while foreign actors, Iranian and Russian, have interfered in the internal matters of Syria. While the White House, Congress and the Pentagon can't legally acknowledge the CIA training program, because it's still technically classified, there's little reason why our media need to entertain a similar charade.

Let's start with Peter Baker's New York Times piece from September 17 and some of its improbable claims:

#### [Finger-Pointing, but Few Answers, After a Syria Solution Fails](#)

By any measure, President Obama's effort to train a Syrian opposition army to fight the Islamic State on the ground has been an abysmal failure. The military acknowledged this week that just four or five American-trained fighters are actually fighting.

Notice the sleight-of-hand. There may only be "four or five American-trained fighters...fighting" expressly against ISIS, but there is no doubt thousands more American-trained fighters are fighting in Syria. The DoD's statement is manifestly false, but because the New York Times is simply quoting "the military"—which, again, cannot not legally acknowledge the CIA program—it is left entirely unchallenged. This is the worst type of "officials say" journalism. The premise, while ostensibly critical of US foreign policy, is

actually helping advance its larger goal of rewriting US involvement in the Syrian civil war. A four-year-long deliberate strategy of backing anti-Assad forces—which has helped fuel the bloody civil war and [paved the way](#) for the rise of ISIS—is reduced to a cheesy “bumbling bureaucrat” narrative.

Baker went on:

But the White House says it is not to blame. The finger, it says, should be pointed not at Mr. Obama but at those who pressed him to attempt training Syrian rebels in the first place — a group that, in addition to congressional Republicans, happened to include former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

At briefings this week after the disclosure of the paltry results, Josh Earnest, the White House press secretary, repeatedly noted that Mr. Obama always had been a skeptic of training Syrian rebels. The military was correct in concluding that “this was a more difficult endeavor than we assumed and that we need to make some changes to that program,” Mr. Earnest said. “But I think it’s also time for our critics to ‘fess up in this regard as well. They were wrong.”

In effect, Mr. Obama is arguing that he reluctantly went along with those who said it was the way to combat the Islamic State, but that he never wanted to do it and has now has been vindicated in his original judgment. The I-told-you-so argument, of course, assumes that the idea of training rebels itself was flawed and not that it was started too late and executed ineffectively, as critics maintain.

The sleight-of-hand continues: The article presents the training of rebels as a “way to combat the Islamic State,” but repeatedly speaks in general of training Syrian rebels as something “Obama always had been a skeptic of”—which flies in the face of the fact that he did so, to the tune of \$1 billion a year over four years, with 10,000 rebels trained.

But the piece goes on to make clear that when it’s talking about “training Syrian rebels,” it’s referring not only to the anti-ISIS program but to efforts to overthrow Syria’s government as well:

The idea of bolstering Syrian rebels was debated from the early days of the civil war, which started in 2011. Mrs. Clinton, along with [David H. Petraeus](#), then the CIA director, and [Leon E. Panetta](#), then the Defense secretary, supported arming opposition forces, but the president worried about deep entanglement in someone else’s war after the bloody experience in Iraq.

In 2014, however, after the Islamic State had [swept through parts of Syria and Iraq](#), Mr. Obama reversed course and initiated a \$500 million program to train and arm rebels who had been vetted and were told to fight the Islamic State, not Mr. Assad’s government.

This is outright false. These two paragraphs, while cleverly parsed, give the reader the impression Obama parted with the CIA and Mrs. Clinton on arming opposition forces, only to “reverse course” in 2014. But the president never “reversed course,” because he did exactly what the Panetta, Petraeus and Clinton urged him to do: He armed the opposition. Once again, the Pentagon’s Keystone Kop plan is being passed off by journalists who who

should know better as the beginning and end of American involvement in the Syrian rebellion. Nowhere in this report is the CIA's plan mentioned at all.

The whitewashing would get even worse:

Some Syrian rebels who asked for American arms in 2011 and 2012 eventually gave up and allied themselves with more radical groups, analysts said, leaving fewer fighters who were friendly to the United States.

But the US *did* get arms to Syrian rebels in 2012. In fact, Baker's own publication reported this fact in 2012 ([6/21/12](#)):

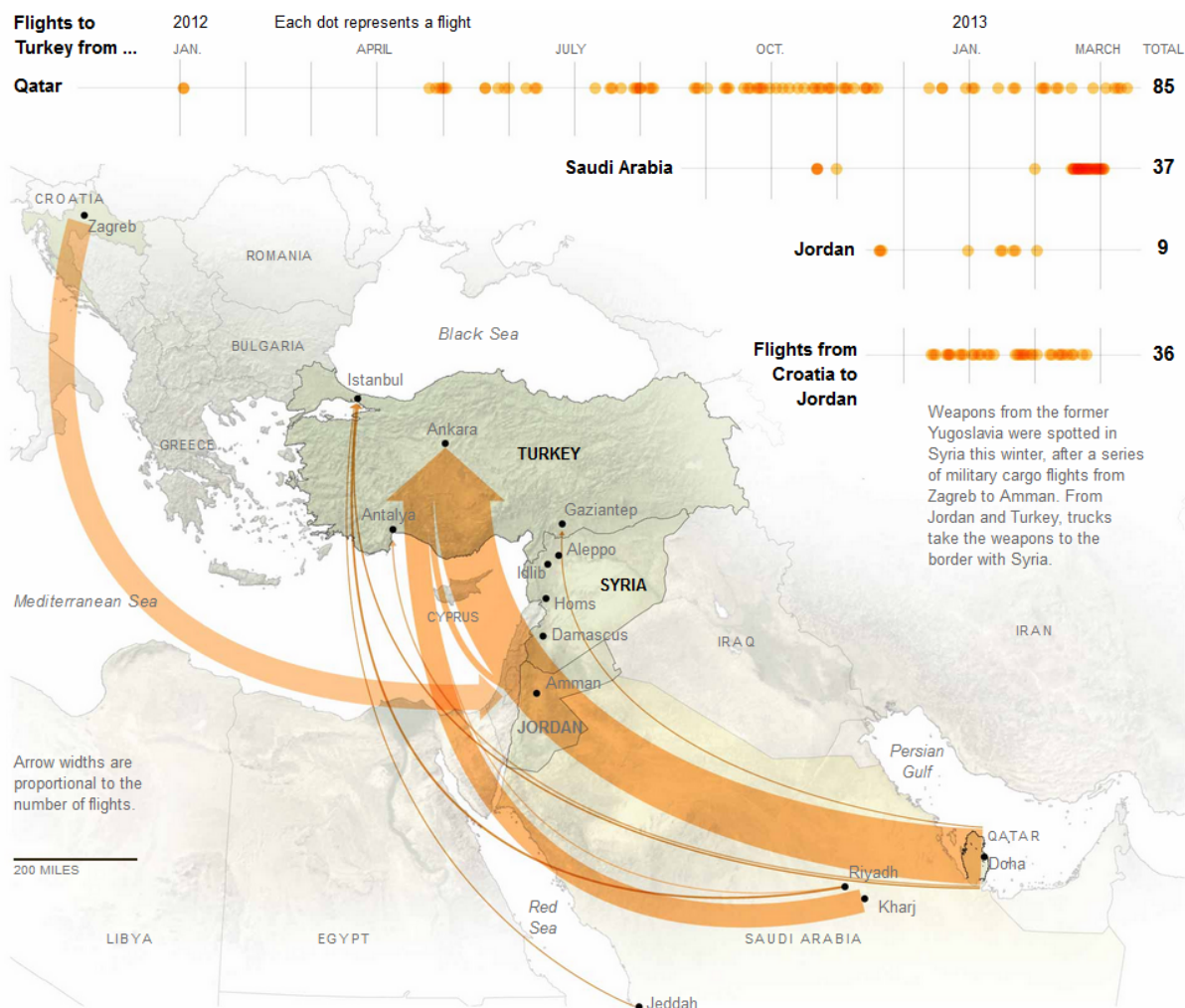
### CIA Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition

Indeed, according to a rather detailed New York Times infographic from 2013 ([3/23/13](#)), shipments began, at the latest, in January 2012:

#### An Arms Pipeline to the Syrian Rebels

More than 160 military cargo flights for Syria's rebels, mostly from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, have landed in Turkey and Jordan since January 2012.

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Note that this map accompanied an [article](#) headlined "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From CIA."



The CIA's program, when discussing a fraught foreign policy issue like Syria, is simply thrown down the memory hole. How can the public have an honest conversation about what the US should or shouldn't do in Syria next when the most respected newspaper in the US can't honestly acknowledge what we have done thus far?



Vox depicts Free Syrian Army fighters—without acknowledging that the CIA helped to arm the rebels. (photo: STR/AFP/Getty Images)

The New York Times wouldn't be alone. Comcast-funded Vox would also ignore the CIA rebel training program in its almost [4,000-word overview of the Syrian civil war](#). Again, the Pentagon's program would be the sole focus in regards to funding rebels, along with reports of Gulf states doing so as well. But the CIA funding, training and arming thousands of rebels since at least 2012? Nowhere to be found. Not mentioned or alluded to once.

[Reuters](#) and the [Washington Post](#)'s reports on the US's Syrian strategy revamp, while they didn't fudge history as bad as the Times and Vox, also ignored any attempts by the CIA to back Syrian opposition rebels. This crucial piece of history is routinely omitted from mainstream public discourse.

As the military build-up and posturing in Syria between Russia and the United States escalates, policy makers and influencers on this side of the Atlantic are urgently trying to portray the West's involvement in Syria as either nonexistent or marked by good-faith incompetence. By whitewashing the West's clandestine involvement in Syria, the media not only portrays Russia as the sole contributor to hostilities, it absolves Europe and the United States of their own guilt in helping create a refugee crisis and fuel a civil war that has devastated so many for so long.

*Adam Johnson is an associate editor at AlterNet and writes frequently for FAIR.org. You can follow him on Twitter at [@adamjohnsonnyc](#).*

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