

Holes in the Neocons' Syria Story

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Official Washington's narrative about Syria's civil war is that innocent "pro-democracy" protesters were driven to violence because the Syrian government cracked down harshly – and that if only President Barack Obama had armed the protesters and supported "regime change" at the beginning, the current crises in Syria and Iraq could have been averted.

But the storyline was never that black and white. Though there surely were many Syrian protesters in 2011 simply seeking the end of President Bashar al-Assad's rule and political reform, there were also extremist elements in their ranks from the start, including "Al-Qaeda in Iraq" terrorists, as a Defense Intelligence Agency [report](#) describes.

"AQI supported the Syrian opposition from the beginning, both ideologically and through the media," the DIA wrote in a partially redacted classified report from August 2012 that was released to Judicial Watch in response to a court case over the Benghazi controversy. "AQI declared its opposition of Assad's government because it considered it a sectarian regime targeting Sunnis."

In other words, Assad's early complaint about "terrorists" having infiltrated the opposition wasn't entirely false, although it was often treated that way by the mainstream U.S. news media. Even early in the disorders in 2011, there were cases of armed elements killing police and soldiers.

Later, there were terrorist bombings targeting senior Syrian government officials, including a July 18, 2012 explosion – deemed a suicide bombing by government officials – that killed Syrian Defense Minister General Dawoud Rajiha and Assef Shawkat, the deputy defense minister and Assad's brother-in-law.

By then, it had become clear that Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and other Sunni-ruled countries were funneling money and other help to jihadist rebels seeking to oust Assad's relatively secular regime. Assad is an Alawite, a branch of Shia Islam, but he also drew strong support from Christians, Shiites and other minorities fearing persecution if Sunni extremists prevailed.

As the DIA report noted about Syria,

"internally, events are taking a clear sectarian direction. ... The salafist, the Muslim Brotherhood, and AQI are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria. ... The West, Gulf countries, and Turkey support the opposition; while Russia, China, and Iran support the regime."

The situation has sharpened further since 2012, as Al-Qaeda's affiliate, the "salafist" Nusra Front, emerged as a dominant element in the rebel force. Another key player – "Al-Qaeda in Iraq" – was Al-Qaeda's hyper-violent affiliate that arose in resistance to the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq and later rebranded itself the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" or simply the "Islamic State."

Al-Qaeda Ascendant

By the time of the DIA report – in August 2012 – the analysts already understood the risks that AQI represented both to Syria and Iraq. The report included a stark warning about the expansion of AQI, which has since splintered from Al-Qaeda central over the issue of whether territory should be held and an Islamic caliphate declared. Al-Qaeda central opposed that approach and considered AQI's (or the Islamic State's) tactics excessively brutal and divisive.

But AQI (or the Islamic State then referred to as ISI) was finding its ranks swelled by the arrival of global jihadists rallying to the black banner of Sunni militancy, intolerant of both Westerners and "heretics" from Shiite and other non-Sunni branches of Islam. As this movement strengthened it risked spilling back into Iraq, where AQI had originated. In mid-summer 2012, the DIA wrote:

"This creates the ideal atmosphere for AQI to return to its old pockets in Mosul and Ramadi [in Iraq], and will provide a renewed momentum under the presumption of unifying the jihad among Sunni Iraq and Syria, and the rest of the Sunnis in the Arab world against what it considers one enemy, the dissenters [apparently a reference to Shiite and other non-Sunni forms of Islam]. ISI could also declare an Islamic State through its union with other terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria, which will create grave danger in regards to unifying Iraq and the protection of its territory."

In that climate of a growing Sunni terrorist threat, the idea that the CIA could effectively arm and train a "moderate" rebel force to somehow compete with the Islamists was already delusional, yet that was the dominant argument among the Important People of Official Washington, simply organize a "moderate" army to oust Assad and everything would turn out just great.

At the time, the neocons and their junior partners, the "liberal interventionists," were in full rhetorical battle garb, their usual attire. They had prevailed upon President Barack Obama to support a similar "regime change" in Libya where dictator Muammar Gaddafi also had cited terrorist Islamist networks – operating in eastern Libya – and vowed to crush them.

Instead, brushing aside Gaddafi's terrorist warnings and vowing a "responsibility to protect" – an "R2P" mission to save – "innocent civilians," the United States put together an international force to bomb Gaddafi's troops as they tried to regain control of the Benghazi area of eastern Libya. The destruction of Gaddafi's military enabled his various enemies, including Al-Qaeda-connected extremists, to seize much of the country, including the capital of Tripoli.

On Oct. 20, 2011, Gaddafi was hunted down in the city of Sirte, beaten, sodomized with a knife and then murdered. Upon the news of Gaddafi's death, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton exulted, "We came. We saw. He died."

However, events turned less happy in the wake of Gaddafi's murder. As he had warned, Islamic extremists were becoming a serious threat. As the jihadists expanded their reach inside the post-Gaddafi power vacuum power, Libya descended into a bloody civil war.

On Sept. 11, 2012, U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other U.S. diplomatic personnel were killed by an Islamic terror group which attacked the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, what Clinton termed her worst moment as Secretary of State.

The troubles in Libya also spread to neighboring countries, including Mali, touching off more violence and disorder. Amid this cascading chaos, Libya became a source for weapons going to fuel the Syrian conflict.

Arms to Syria

On Oct. 12, 2012, another secret DIA [report](#), based on raw intelligence and obtained by Judicial Watch in its Benghazi-related lawsuit, stated that in the weeks before Stevens's death,

"Weapons from the former Libya military stockpiles were shipped from the port of Benghazi, Libya to the Port of Banias and the Port of Borj Islam, Syria. The weapons shipped during late-August 2012 were Sniper rifles, RPG's, and 125mm and 155mm howitzers missiles."

Though the DIA did not specify who organized these shipments and exactly who got them, this information matches reporting by Seymour Hersh in a lengthy [article](#) entitled "The Red Line and the Rat Line" in the April 17, 2014 issue of the London Review of Books. The "rat line" was a reference to a secret CIA channel of weapons from Libya to Syrian rebels who were being supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Hersh wrote:

"The full extent of US co-operation with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in assisting the rebel opposition in Syria has yet to come to light. The Obama administration has never publicly admitted to its role in creating what the CIA calls a 'rat line', a back channel highway into Syria.

"The rat line, authorised in early 2012, was used to funnel weapons and ammunition from Libya via southern Turkey and across the Syrian border to the opposition. Many of those in Syria who ultimately received the weapons were jihadists, some of them affiliated with al-Qaida. (The DNI [Director of National Intelligence] spokesperson said: 'The idea that the United States was providing weapons from Libya to anyone is false.')

Hersh continued:

"A highly classified annex to the [Senate Intelligence Committee's Benghazi] report, not made public, described a secret agreement reached in early 2012 between the Obama and [Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan administrations. It pertained to the rat line. By the terms of the agreement, funding came from Turkey, as well as Saudi Arabia and Qatar; the CIA, with the support of MI6, was responsible for getting arms from Gaddafi's arsenals into

Syria.

“A number of front companies were set up in Libya, some under the cover of Australian entities. Retired American soldiers, who didn’t always know who was really employing them, were hired to manage procurement and shipping. The operation was run by David Petraeus, the [then] CIA director ... (A spokesperson for Petraeus denied the operation ever took place.)”

Despite all the official denials, the DIA report adds weight to the “rat line” allegations, since it would have been difficult for an unsanctioned operation to remove significant weaponry from Gaddafi’s military warehouses in Benghazi and ship it across the Mediterranean Sea to Syrian ports without significant outside assistance.

As the DIA report stated, “During the immediate aftermath of, and following the uncertainty caused by, the downfall of the ((Qaddafi)) regime in October 2011 and up until early September of 2012, weapons from the former Libya military stockpiles located in Benghazi, Libya were shipped from the port of Benghazi, Libya to the ports of Baniyas and the Port of Borj Islam, Syria.

“The Syrian ports were chosen due to the small amount of cargo traffic transiting these two ports. The ships used to transport the weapons were medium-sized and able to hold 10 or less shipping containers of cargo.”

Baniyas is located about midway along Syria’s Mediterranean coast. Borj Islam is further north, closer to Turkey.

‘Always ... a Fantasy’

Though the weapons may have been destined for the Syrian “moderate” rebels, it’s clear that many and probably most ended up in the hands of Al-Qaeda-connected and other Sunni-extremist organizations. Obama himself recognized the futility of trying to arm and train a “moderate” force that could compete with either the Syrian military or the more committed Islamist groups.

As Obama [explained](#) to New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman in August 2014, the reality was that the idea that a “moderate” rebel force could achieve much was “always ... a fantasy.” However, it was a fantasy that had powerful political appeal in Official Washington, where Secretary Clinton and other “liberal interventionists” joined the influential neocons in pressing Obama to buy in.

While resisting some of the more aggressive demands, Obama did approve limited CIA support for the rebels and talked tough, demanding that Assad “must go” and setting a “red line” if Assad used chemical weapons.

Thus, the clamor for a Libya-like U.S. intervention in Syria reached its crescendo in August 2013 after a mysterious sarin gas attack outside Damascus, which Official Washington immediately blamed on Assad. But there were strong reasons to doubt that version from the start, particularly because Assad had just welcomed to Damascus United Nations inspectors who were supposed to investigate allegations of rebel chemical-weapons use.

Instead the sarin attack diverted the inspectors and created international pressure for a

devastating retaliatory strike against Assad's military, which could well have cleared the way for Islamist rebels to seize control of Syria and thus put Al-Qaeda's affiliates in charge of a major Middle Eastern country.

At the last minute, Obama veered away from a full-scale American assault and worked with Russian President Vladimir Putin to arrange a compromise in which Assad surrendered his entire chemical weapons arsenal (while still denying a role in the sarin attack).

Obama's decision opened him to renewed attacks from the neocons, Republicans and many "liberal interventionists" for supposedly failing to enforce his "red line." Later, however, evidence built up that the sarin attack may well have been a provocation (or false-flag operation) by rebels to get the U.S. military to destroy Assad's defenses and clear the way for an Islamist victory. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case](#)."]]

The extent of radical jihadist control of the Syrian rebel movement also became obvious. In September 2013, key elements of the U.S.-backed "moderate" opposition publicly threw in their lot with Al-Qaeda's affiliates, sharing many of the weapons that U.S. and its allied intelligence services had snuck into Syria. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Syrian Rebels Embrace Al-Qaeda](#)."]]

Prescient Reports

Many of the grimmest predictions from the DIA intelligence reports have proven true. By summer 2014, the Islamic State opened an offensive inside Iraq, overrunning the major city of Mosul and more recently capturing Ramadi and mounting terrorist bombings inside Baghdad.

In Syria, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey stepped up their support for a new jihadist-dominated rebel coalition called the Army of Conquest with Al-Qaeda's Nusra Front playing a key role. The coalition recently captured the city of Idlib. Meanwhile, the Islamic State just seized the strategic and historic city of Palmyra.

Though President Obama and the United States still consider Saudi Arabia an important regional "ally," the truth is that Saudi Arabia has long been the principal support for Islamic terrorism, as acknowledged in a document leaked by then-Pvt. Bradley Manning to Wikileaks. A "secret" Dec. 30, 2009 State Department [report](#) on "Terrorist Finance" disclosed that:

"While the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) takes seriously the threat of terrorism within Saudi Arabia, it has been an ongoing challenge to persuade Saudi officials to treat terrorist financing emanating from Saudi Arabia as a strategic priority.

"Due in part to intense focus by the USG over the last several years, Saudi Arabia has begun to make important progress on this front and has responded to terrorist financing concerns raised by the United States through proactively investigating and detaining financial facilitators of concern.

"Still, donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide. ... more needs to be done since Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for al-Qa'ida, the Taliban, LeT, and other terrorist groups. ..."

Saudi Arabia's longstanding support for Sunni terrorism has created difficulties for a number of U.S. presidents. After the 9/11 attacks, with Saudis accounting for 15 of the 19 hijackers, President George W. Bush arranged for members of Osama bin Laden's family and other prominent Saudis to fly out of the United States on the first flights allowed back into the air. Bush later concealed 28 pages of a congressional 9/11 report that addressed Saudi financing for Al-Qaeda.

President Obama faces his own complicated relationship with the Saudi royals, especially since Saudi Arabia has developed a discreet alliance with Israel, which wields enormous political and media power through its lobby in the United States. The Saudi-Israel alliance has made it nearly impossible for Obama to join a united front with Iran and Russia with the goal of preventing an Al-Qaeda or Islamic State victory in Syria. [See "[Did Money Seal Israeli-Saudi Alliance?](#)"]

Yet, recognizing the strategic catastrophe that would follow the fall of Damascus, Obama has taken hesitant steps toward increasing cooperation with Russia and Iran. But he then pulls back amid renewed neocon-driven propaganda against Russia and Iran. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Obama's Strategic Shift.](#)"]

The neocons and their liberal-hawk allies also continue to promote the narrative that – if only Obama had armed the Syrian opposition sooner and had bombed Assad's military in summer 2013 – all the problems would have been solved. Of course, many of these same experts argued that Bush's invasion of Iraq was going to bring peace, harmony and democracy to the Middle East.

Though their Syrian narrative is just as delusional as their Iraq narrative was, the fact that their Syrian prescription was voided means they can keep it alive as an alternative history, untested in the harsh environment of the Middle East. But it should be clear by now that these schemes drawn up in the board rooms of neocon think tanks never take into account the hard realities on the ground.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com's "[The Day After Damascus Falls.](#)"]

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, America's Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes America's Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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