

# “Policy Divisions” between the Joint Chiefs of Staff, The White House and the CIA?

How Criticism Of Hersh's New Piece Fails To Understand What Really Happened

By [Moon of Alabama](#)

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Featured image: Investigative reporter Seymour Hersh gestures during a panel discussion on “The Challenges of Reporting About Iraq” at the Associated Press Managing Editors annual conference in San Jose, Calif., Friday, Oct. 28, 2005. (AP Photo/Paul Sakuma)

*The [latest Seymour Hersh piece](#) alleges that the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) under General Dempsey undermined the official White House policy on Syria. Their impetus to do so came after a Defense Intelligence Agency analysis [found](#) in 2012 that there were hardly any “moderate rebels” in Syria but only Islamists fighting against the Syrian state.*

*[Military to Military: US Intelligence Sharing in the Syrian War](#) By [Seymour M. Hersh](#), December 23, 2015*

*The CIA was at least since early 2012 delivering weapons from [Libya to Turkey](#) as well as [through other routes](#). The U.S. Ambassador to Libya Chris Stevens [was killed](#) on September 11 2012 in Benghazi over some issues with the weapon transfers. Once in Turkey those weapons, as well as plane loads of others purchased by Qatar and Saudi Arabia, were given to “moderate rebels” who took them into Syria. There they [sold off](#) at least part of every weapon and ammunition haul to the Islamists terror gangs which were, and still are, financed by the Wahhabi Gulf states. A [new BBCRadio4 report](#) by Peter Osborne explains in detail how that scheme works.*

The JCS under Dempsey was quite disturbed that weapons transferred by the CIA were going to exactly those people they had fought in Iraq and Afghanistan just a few years ago. They decided, according to Hersh’s source, to undermine the White House’s and CIA’s regime-change program. They provided intelligence to Syria via Germany, Russia and Israel. They also convinced the CIA that it was preferable to give away very old weapons that could be sourced in Turkey instead of newer but more difficult to transport weapons from Libya. As Hersh writes:

‘Our policy of arming the opposition to Assad was unsuccessful and actually having a negative impact,’ the former JCS adviser said. ‘The Joint Chiefs believed that Assad should not be replaced by fundamentalists. The administration’s policy was contradictory. They wanted Assad to go but the opposition was dominated by extremists. So who was going to replace him? To say Assad’s got to go is fine, but if you follow that through – therefore anyone is better. It’s the “anybody else is better” issue that the JCS had with Obama’s policy.’ The Joint Chiefs felt that a direct challenge to Obama’s policy would

have 'had a zero chance of success'. So in the autumn of 2013 they decided to take steps against the extremists without going through political channels, by providing US intelligence to the militaries of other nations, on the understanding that it would be passed on to the Syrian army and used against the common enemy, Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State.

And Hersh on the weapon dealing:

By the late summer of 2013, the DIA's assessment had been circulated widely, but although many in the American intelligence community were aware that the Syrian opposition was dominated by extremists the CIA-sponsored weapons kept coming, presenting a continuing problem for Assad's army. Gaddafi's stockpile had created an international arms bazaar, though prices were high. 'There was no way to stop the arms shipments that had been authorised by the president,' the JCS adviser said. 'The solution involved an appeal to the pocketbook. The CIA was approached by a representative from the Joint Chiefs with a suggestion: there were far less costly weapons available in Turkish arsenals that could reach the Syrian rebels within days, and without a boat ride.' But it wasn't only the CIA that benefited. 'We worked with Turks we trusted who were not loyal to Erdoğan,' the adviser said, 'and got them to ship the jihadists in Syria all the obsolete weapons in the arsenal, including M1 carbines that hadn't been seen since the Korean War and lots of Soviet arms. It was a message Assad could understand: "We have the power to diminish a presidential policy in its tracks."'

The JCS, according to Hersh, was undermining its Commander in Chief. That is, arguably, treason but U.S. history is full of examples where the military chiefs were pushing into a very different direction than their civil commanders. Trueman versus Douglas MacArthur is just one example. Think of the closing of the Guantanamo prison which the military is actively preventing for seven years now despite Obama's promise, demand and orders to shut Gitmo down.

Max Fisher, a critic of Hersh [not known for](#) factual quality journalism, [claims](#) that the Hersh account must be false because Dempsey was not against weaponizing the insurgents but even publicly asked to give them weapons:

Hersh alleges that the mastermind of this entire conspiracy was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Martin Dempsey, whom Hersh says was horrified by Obama's plan to arm Syrian rebels and sought to aid Assad. This claim is difficult to believe: While in office, Dempsey [famously and publicly](#) clashed with Obama over Syria because Dempsey wanted to do more to arm Syrian rebels. Contemporaneous accounts of arguments within the White House support this, with Dempsey arguing the US should more robustly arm Syrian rebels, and Obama arguing for less. Yet Hersh claims, with no evidence, that Dempsey was so opposed to arming Syrian rebels that he would commit an apparent act of treason to subvert those plans. Hersh makes no effort to reconcile this seemingly fatal contradiction, and indeed it is not clear Hersh is even aware that Dempsey is known for supporting rather than opposing efforts to arm the Syrian rebels.

Hersh is of course perfectly aware what Dempsey said and thought in early 2013. The one not aware is the critic.

Dempsey [argued](#) in early 2013 that the Pentagon should give weapons to a few carefully

vetted rebels:

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta acknowledged that he and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, had supported a plan last year to arm carefully vetted Syrian rebels.

...  
[D]id the Pentagon, Mr. McCain continued, support the recommendation by Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Petraeus "that we provide weapons to the resistance in Syria? Did you support that?" "We did," Mr. Panetta said.

"You did support that," Mr. McCain said.

"We did," General Dempsey added.

The Pentagon plan was killed by the White House in favor of the ongoing CIA operation. This exchange then does not contradict but even supports the Hersh reporting. Let me explain the context.

By early 2013 Dempsey knew perfectly well that the CIA was supplying -directly or indirectly- everyone in Syria who asked for arms and ammunition. These weapons were going to the Jihadis who were simply the best financed groups. Because the CIA program was secret Dempsey of course could not say so in a public Congress hearing. But Dempsey wanted to give arms to "carefully vetted Syrian rebels" to replace the CIA program with a Pentagon program under his command. He would then have been able to direct the weapon flow and to prevent a further arming of the Islamist terrorists. Dempsey supported a Pentagon program arming the rebels so he could control the arming of the rebels that was already happening under a CIA program but was creating long term trouble.

When the hostile takeover of the CIA arming program failed, Dempsey and the JCS tried to sabotage it by providing old Turkish weapons to the CIA.

Only much later was the Pentagon allowed to run its own training program and to arm its own groups of Syrian rebels. But that program was running in parallel to the ongoing CIA program and was thereby useless for the purpose Dempsey had originally intended. It did not replace the dangerous CIA program. The Pentagon then sabotaged its own program by training only a few rebels and [sending them](#) into a Jihadi infested area where they promptly gave their arms up to Jabhat al-Nusra. This publicly proved Dempsey's main critic point of the long running CIA program: any arms going into Syria ended up in the hands of long term U.S. enemies.

I understand that Hersh's sourcing is rather weak. His main and sole direct source for the JCS story is a "former senior adviser to the Joint Chiefs". That could be a military or a civilian source. Colonel Pat Lang, one of Hersh's named sources for other points in the piece, [thinks](#) the main source is real and the story true. Lang, who sometimes still consults the military, surely has enough insider connections to have a quite clear picture of this issue.

It is fine to criticize Hersh. His reporting often relies on anonymous sources. But throughout his career Hersh's reporting was proven right more often than his critics criticism of it. Here the criticism of Hersh relies on a small tunnel vision of what Dempsey claimed he wanted in a public hearing without regard of the context of Dempsey's claim. Dempsey wanted to replace the then still secret CIA arming program that the DIA and other parts of the military

had rightly found to be on a very dangerous path.

The Pentagon under Dempsey, fearing the CIA was repeating old errors, was turf fighting against the CIA under neocon Petraeus and later under the great friend of Saudi Arabia John Brennan. Unfortunately the White House backed the CIA and thereby, more or less willfully, [allied with](#) the Islamic State and the other [assorted Jihadi organizations](#) (pdf) in Syria.

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