

Say Goodbye to Regime Change in Syria. Phasing Out of CIA “Train and Equip” in Support of “Moderate” Rebels?

Trump's decision to stop sending arms to rebels alters everything.

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President Donald Trump [has ordered](#) that the CIA begin to phase out its covert train-and-equip program in support of so-called “moderate” rebels fighting against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The program represented the tip of the spear of a larger goal of regime change that had been the official policy of the United States since September 2013, when President Obama declared [“Assad must go”](#) in the aftermath of a chemical attack in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta that killed hundreds of civilians. Through this action, President Trump is walking away from an established policy of America taking an active role in forcing the Syrian President’s ouster, willing instead to leave Assad’s fate in the hands of the Syrian people and its allies. The decision by Trump to terminate support for the “moderate” Syrian rebels, while not giving voice to a policy that rejects regime change in Syria, is the clearest signal yet that the United States has changed course on trying to force regime change in Damascus as a precondition for a political settlement of the Syrian crisis.

The train and equip mission of the CIA in Syria can be traced back to the spring of 2011, when a revolution broke out in Libya against the dictatorial rule of Muammar Gadhafi. Backed by NATO airpower, anti-regime fighters were able to establish control over large areas inside Libya. [The CIA began a program to train and equip these fighters](#), supplying weapons to Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, who in turn shipped these weapons to Libya, where they were turned over to Libyan rebels. (This circuitous route was chosen to avoid the U.S. being in violation of a UN embargo against weapons deliveries to Libya.)



Crates of recoilless rifle rounds in a rebel cache in Idlib, Syria, bear the triangle symbol of arms sent to Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi. (Source: Tyler Hicks/The New York Times)

In August 2011, in the aftermath of the capture of the Libyan capital of Tripoli by rebel forces, [Qatar began diverting arms](#) originally intended for Libya to Turkey, where they were turned over to rebel forces that had, since June of 2011, been fighting against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. These rebels were grouped together under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), an ostensibly secular resistance group that [was in reality controlled by the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood](#), an Islamist organization that had been crushed by Bashar al-Assad's father back in the early 1980', and was operating in exile in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. While the CIA was not directly involved in this activity, CIA personnel in Libya and Turkey monitored these shipments to make sure no sensitive weaponry, such as hand-held surface-to-air missiles, made their way into Syria. This effort, which involved billions of dollars of arms, including those provided by the United States for the express purpose of aiding Libyan rebels, continued through 2012 and into 2013. (The U.S. Ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, who was killed in an attack on the American Consulate in Benghazi in September 2012, [was involved in coordinating these weapons transfers](#).)

As the fighting in Syria expanded in scope and scale, the number of anti-regime combatant organizations increased. The FSA took on an increasingly Islamist character, and many of its fighters defected to more extreme organizations, such as al-Nusra (an Al Qaeda affiliate). Many of the CIA-provided weapons being shipped by Qatar through Turkey made their way into these Islamist units, with the unintended result being that the U.S. was actively arming Al Qaeda and other extremist entities openly hostile to American interests. In an effort to control the flow of weaponry into Syria, [President Obama authorized the CIA](#) to formally take over the process of training and equipping Syrian rebels. This operation, known by its codename, Timber Sycamore, was run out of Turkey and Jordan with the full support of both governments.

From 2013 through 2015, Timber Sycamore oversaw the purchase of billions of dollars of modern weaponry from Balkan suppliers, primarily in Croatia, and their shipment to ports in

Turkey and Jordan, where the CIA, working with Turkish and Jordanian intelligence agencies, trained and equipped thousands of rebel fighters from more than 50 groups inside Syria that had been vetted by the CIA. The impact of this program on the fighting in Syria was significant—by the fall of 2015, the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad was teetering on the brink of collapse, largely due to the military pressure brought to bear on the regime by these U.S.-backed groups. The success of these rebels played a large role in triggering Russian military intervention in Syria in the fall of 2015, with Russian air power being unleashed against these very same rebels in an effort to save the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The Russian gambit worked, and by 2016 the Syrian military had reclaimed the initiative, [recapturing the city of Aleppo](#) and driving the U.S.-backed rebels back on all fronts.



A Free Syrian Army trainer addresses fellow fighters as he conducts a demonstration on how to use anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons at a training camp in the northern countryside of Aleppo

The U.S. and its allies had no effective response to the Russian intervention. One of the reasons for this is the fact that there was little to differentiate the U.S.-backed rebels on the ground inside Syria from the more extremist fighters from al-Nusra and other Islamist groups. While the United States protested the Russian air strikes, it had to deal with the reality that Timber Sycamore was arming far more than just the so-called FSA. In both Turkey and Jordan, [corrupt intelligence officers](#) were siphoning off tens of millions of dollars in weapons and munitions, selling them on the black market, where they were bought by al-Nusra and, after 2014, ISIS. The U.S.-backed rebels would often sell or trade their US-provided weapons to both al-Nusra and ISIS, and in many cases, U.S.-trained fighters would defect with these weapons. Thousands of fighters serving under the banner of Al Qaeda and ISIS were, in fact, armed and trained by the CIA.

Another problem confronted by the United States was the growing divergence between its objectives in supporting so-called “moderate” Syrian rebels, which were shared by Jordan, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, and the willingness on the part of Turkey and Qatar to train and equip more radical anti-Assad fighters, including al-Nusra (Al Qaeda) and ISIS. The position taken by Turkey and Qatar are rooted in their mutual support for the Muslim Brotherhood, which had morphed into various radical Islamist units operating inside Syria under the guise of the FSA, but in reality fighting in support of both al-Nusra and ISIS. [Qatari support for the Muslim Brotherhood](#) became unsustainable for Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf Arab nations, which subsequently outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist

organization. The demise of Timber Sycamore is directly linked to the ongoing crisis between Qatar and its Gulf Arab neighbors over support for the Muslim Brotherhood; Turkey's position in support of Qatar has, given Ankara's status as a NATO member, likewise created diplomatic problems for the U.S. that are simplified through the termination of the CIA's train-and-equip efforts in Syria.

President Trump's decision to terminate Timber Sycamore is part and parcel of an overall policy objective designed to gain control over U.S. objectives in the region. In many ways, Washington's policy of regime change in Syria, of which the CIA's train-and-equip program was a major part, was responsible for the crisis currently underway in Syria, and the region as a whole. Central to this failure was the notion that there existed inside Syria a moderate, secular force able and willing to take down the regime of Bashar al-Assad, which led to the decision to flood the region with U.S.-provided arms and munitions that only served to spread of Islamic extremism under the banner of Al Qaeda and ISIS.

The fact is that there was no secular, moderate force worthy of the name operating inside Syria; virtually the entire anti-Assad effort is dominated by Islamist extremists who, if Assad was overthrown, would probably replace a secular dictator with something far worse. The Obama policy of regime change in Syria, like the Bush policy in Iraq, has done little more than unleash forces which the U.S. was unable to control, costing American taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars and the blood of American military personnel who lost their lives in its implementation.

President Trump's decision to terminate Timber Sycamore, and with it the Obama-era policy of "Assad must go," when seen in this context, is the clearest expression to date of his desire to rein in the unsuccessful policies of the past. The president's decision liberates the United States, which can now proceed in its fight against ISIS and Islamic extremism unencumbered by policies that do little to further American interests while empowering enemies. By working with Russia to focus on the defeat of ISIS, President Trump is positioning the United States to play an important role in helping shape a political solution to the Syrian problem that will bring peace to the people of Syria and the region. Achieving such a solution will not be easy, nor is the outcome guaranteed. Timber Sycamore, however, was nothing more than an impediment in this regard, and President Trump was wise in shutting it down.

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