

US Backing for ‘Moderate’ Syrian Rebels: Long Reported, Continually Forgotten

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That the US is arming and training Syrian rebels has been [well-documented](#) for [over two years](#), yet Western media have historically suffered from a strange collective amnesia when reporting this fact. As Ian Sinclair noted last September in the Huffington Post ([9/23/14](#)):

In mid-2012, the most influential newspaper in the world [reported the US was helping to arm the rebels](#)—a fact confirmed by [subsequent stories](#) in the New York Times itself, as well as [numerous reports](#) in other mainstream news outlets around the world.

Contrast this publicly available, easily accessed information with these summaries from the mainstream media of the ongoing US role in Syria...:

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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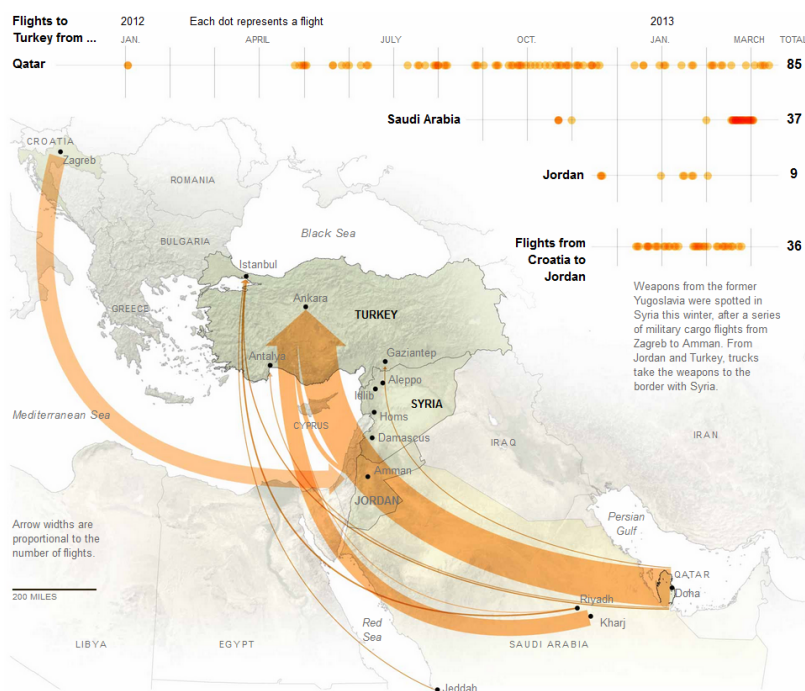


Image: New York Times map ([3/24/13](#)) of arms flowing to Syrian rebels “with help from the CIA.” (graphic: Sergio Pecanha/NYT)

- New York Times ([5/4/13](#)): “President [Obama] seems to be

moving closer to providing lethal assistance to the Syrian rebels, even though he rejected such a policy just months ago.” • Guardian ([5/8/13](#)): “The US, which has outlawed al-Nusra as a terrorist group, has hesitated to arm the FSA [Free Syrian Army].”...

- New York Times ([9/9/14](#)): “Mr Obama has resisted military engagement in Syria for more than three years, out of fear early on that arming the rebels who oppose Mr. Assad would fail to alter the balance in the civil war.”

- BBC Today Programme (9/11/14), presenter Mishal Husein to US ambassador: “If you [the US] had helped the moderate Syrian opposition, the Free Syrian Army, three years ago, even two years ago, we might well not be in the position that we are now. President Obama’s reluctance to intervene and to take action on Syria has contributed to what we are seeing now.”

Why are all of these professional journalists — supposedly a profession made up of stropky, questioning cynics — incapable of stating the most basic of facts about the US role in Syria?

This week, it appears, the media’s collective FSA/CIA amnesia has struck once again, with a series of reports that make no mention of the CIA’s ongoing operation of arming and training Syrian rebels that’s been [thoroughly](#) documented for over [two years](#).



These reports were previewed last month with a report on CNN ([1/16/15](#)) headlined “Pentagon: US to Begin to Train and Equip Moderate Syria Rebels.” This was just false: The US isn’t “beginning to train and equip moderate rebels.” TheGuardian reported on [March 8, 2013](#)—almost two years ago:

Western training of Syrian rebels is under way in Jordan in an effort to strengthen secular elements in the opposition as a bulwark against Islamic extremism, and to begin building security forces to maintain order in the event of Bashar al-Assad’s fall.

Jordanian security sources say the training effort is led by the US, but involves British and French instructors.

The Guardian story cited the Pentagon in acknowledging that “a small group of US special forces and military planners had been to Jordan during the summer to help...train selected rebel fighters.”

Two days later, Reuters ([3/10/13](#)) cited a report by the German magazine Der Spiegel (3/10/13), “quoting what it said were participants and organizers,” that “Americans are training Syrian anti-government fighters in Jordan”:

Some 200 men have already received such training over the past three months and there are plans in the future to provide training for a total 1,200 members of the “Free Syrian Army” in two camps in the south and the east of the country.



Nevertheless, there were a raft of stories last week that treated US training of Syrian rebels as a brand-new initiative—as in NBC News’ “US to Equip Moderate Syrian Rebels: Defense Official” ([2/17/15](#)):

Congress approved President Barack Obama’s request to authorize training the rebels in September. The first group of rebels is expected to begin the six to eight weeks of training in Jordan by the “middle of March,” the official said.

“The first group”? They’re rather late for that.

Reuters had “US to Train and Equip Moderate Syrian Rebels” ([2/17/15](#)) and “US, Turkey to Arm and Train Syrian Rebels” ([2/19/15](#))—the former of which reported that “three US officials, speaking to Reuters on condition of anonymity, said the training could begin in mid-March.”

“Could begin”? It’s not “beginning,” it’s being reassigned.

The Associated Press ([2/18/15](#)) reported that

the US has been talking about training moderate Syrian rebels for months, but has been moving very slowly to identify groups and screen the fighters in an effort to ensure that enemy insurgents aren’t brought in.

The US hasn’t been “talking about” training “moderate” Syrian rebels for months—it’s been actually training them for years, as the Guardian and Der Spiegel revealed.

Even political puff pieces let this trope go unchallenged, as in Politico’s “Marco Rubio

Sharpens Commander-in-Chief Pitch" ([2/20/15](#)), which said Rubio

was right, he said, when he warned the US to immediately arm moderate Syrian rebels two years ago—before the radicals in the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant began beheading hostages and declaring a caliphate.

But this is the exact opposite of reality: Rubio was “warning” the US ought to do something he, as a member of Congress, very well knew they’ve already had been doing for some time. And, of course, Politico makes no mention of the CIA’s ongoing operation of arming and training Syrian rebels, allowing this nonsensical talking point to go unchallenged.

Some articles, even while mentioning this fact, seem to contradict their own lead while doing so. The Wall Street Journal ([2/17/15](#)), writing about a decision to provide US air support to Syrian rebels, writes that “the plan comes as the US prepares to start training moderate rebels, who are waging a two-front fight against the extremists and the Syrian regime.” But in paragraph 12, the article acknowledges:

The Central Intelligence Agency began a covert program to train and arm moderate Syrian rebels in 2013, providing ammunition, small arms and antitank weapons to small groups of trusted fighters. While that program continues, some officials and administration critics say it has fallen well short of its aims.

So, which is it? Is the US “preparing to start training moderate rebels,” or has the CIA been doing so since 2013? What they mean to say, of course, is that the US isn’t “preparing” to “train and arm moderate rebels” but rather—now that the war effort is [popular](#)—transferring the duty over to non-clandestine operations in the Pentagon. This isn’t the announcement of a new policy, but rather a bureaucratic restructuring.

Indeed, even the oft-referenced congressional approval of funds for Syrian rebels in September 2014 (Reuters, “US Congress Approves Arming Syrian Rebels, Funding Government,” [9/19/14](#)) was merely a formal sanctioning of a secret congressional approval that occurred nine months prior (Reuters, “Congress Secretly Approves US Weapons Flow to ‘Moderate’ Syrian Rebels,” [1/27/14](#)):

The weapons deliveries have been funded by the US Congress, in votes behind closed doors, through the end of government fiscal year 2014, which ends on September 30, two officials said.

The media’s insistence on framing these policies as if they are revelations of anything new—and the omission of the crucial fact that such training and arming has been going on since at least June 2012—is the awkward by-product of a war that’s being done in secret first, only to be formally sanctioned by our institutions of power after the fact. Just as Obama [asked Congress](#) to “authorize” airstrikes that began [over six months ago](#), the media is tasked, once again, with acting as if the US’s training and arming of Syrian “moderate” rebels is something new.

It’s not. It’s a years-old political reality that should be treated as a run-of-the-mill government reshuffling rather than the democratically sanctioned shift in policy it almost

certainly isn't.

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