

When Washington Cheered the Jihadists

Official Washington helped unleash hell on Syria and across the Mideast behind the naïve belief that jihadist proxies could be used to transform the region for the better, explains Daniel Lazare.

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In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

Featured image: Journalist James Foley shortly before he was executed by an Islamic State operative in August 2014. (Source: Consortiumnews)

When a Department of Defense intelligence [report](#) about the Syrian rebel movement became public in May 2015, lots of people didn't know what to make of it. After all, what the report said was unthinkable – not only that Al Qaeda had dominated the so-called democratic revolt against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for years, but that the West continued to support the jihadis regardless, even to the point of backing their goal of creating a Sunni Salafist principality in the eastern deserts.

The United States lining up behind Sunni terrorism – how could this be? How could a nice liberal like Barack Obama team up with the same people who had brought down the World Trade Center?

It was impossible, which perhaps explains why the report remained a non-story long after it was released courtesy of a Judicial Watch freedom-of-information [lawsuit](#). The New York Times didn't mention it until [six months later](#) while the Washington Post waited more than a year before [dismissing it](#) as “loopy” and “relatively unimportant.” With ISIS rampaging across much of Syria and Iraq, no one wanted to admit that U.S. attitudes were ever anything other than hostile.

But three years earlier, when the Defense Intelligence Agency was compiling the report, attitudes were different. Jihadis were heroes rather than terrorists, and all the experts agreed that they were a low-risk, high-yield way of removing Assad from office.

After spending five days with a Syrian rebel unit, for instance, New York Times reporter C.J. Chivers [wrote](#) that the group “mixes paramilitary discipline, civilian policing, Islamic law, and the harsh demands of necessity with battlefield coldness and outright cunning.”

Paul Salem, director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, [assured](#) the Washington Post that “al Qaeda is a fringe element” among the rebels, while, not to be outdone, the gossip site Buzzfeed published a [pin-up](#) of a “ridiculously photogenic” jihadi toting an RPG.

“Hey girl,” said the subhead. “Nothing sexier than fighting the oppression of tyranny.”

And then there was Foreign Policy, the magazine founded by neocon guru Samuel P.

Huntington, which was most enthusiastic of all. Gary Gambill's "[Two Cheers for Syrian Islamists](#)," which ran on the FP web site just a couple of weeks after the DIA report was completed, didn't distort the facts or make stuff up in any obvious way. Nonetheless, it is a classic of U.S. propaganda. Its subhead glibly observed: "So the rebels aren't secular Jeffersonians. As far as America is concerned, it doesn't much matter."

Assessing the Damage

Five years later, it's worth a second look to see how Washington uses self-serving logic to reduce an entire nation to rubble.



Prince Bandar bin Sultan, then Saudi ambassador to the United States, meeting with President George W. Bush in Crawford, Texas, on Aug. 27, 2002. (White House photo)

First a bit of background. After displacing France and Britain as the region's prime imperial overlord during the 1956 Suez Crisis and then breaking with Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser a few years later, the United States committed itself to the goal of defeating Arab nationalism and Soviet Communism, two sides of the same coin as far as Washington was concerned. Over the next half-century, this would mean steering Egypt to the right with assistance from the Saudis, isolating Libyan strong man Muammar Gaddafi, and doing what it could to undermine the Syrian Baathist regime as well.

William Roebuck, the American embassy's chargé d'affaires in Damascus, thus [urged](#) Washington in 2006 to coordinate with Egypt and Saudi Arabia to encourage Sunni Syrian fears of Shi'ite Iranian proselytizing even though such concerns are "often exaggerated." It was akin to playing up fears of Jewish dominance in the 1930s in coordination with Nazi Germany.

A year later, former NATO commander Wesley Clark learned of a classified Defense Department memo stating that U.S. policy was now to "attack and destroy the governments in seven countries in five years," first Iraq, then Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Iran. (Quote starts at [2:07](#).)

Since the United States didn't like what such governments were doing, the solution was to install more pliable ones in their place. Hence Washington's joy when the Arab Spring struck Syria in March 2011 and it appeared that protesters would soon topple the Baathists on their own.

Even when lofty democratic rhetoric gave way to ominous sectarian [chants](#) of "Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the coffin," U.S. enthusiasm remained strong. With Sunnis accounting for perhaps 60 percent of the population, strategists figured that there was no way Assad could hold out against religious outrage welling up from below.

Enter Gambill and the FP. The big news, his article began, is that secularists are no longer in command of the burgeoning Syrian rebel movement and that Sunni Islamists are taking the lead instead. As unfortunate as this might seem, he argued that such a development was both unavoidable and far from entirely negative.

"Islamist political ascendancy is inevitable in a majority Sunni Muslim country brutalized for more than four decades by a secular minoritarian dictatorship," he wrote in reference to the Baathists. "Moreover, enormous financial resources are pouring in from the Arab-Islamic world to promote explicitly Islamist resistance to Assad's Alawite-dominated, Iranian-backed regime."

So the answer was not to oppose the Islamists, but to use them. Even though "the Islamist surge will not be a picnic for the Syrian people," Gambill said, "it has two important silver linings for US interests." One is that the jihadis "are simply more effective fighters than their secular counterparts" thanks to their skill with "suicide bombings and roadside bombs."

The other is that a Sunni Islamist victory in Syria will result in "a full-blown strategic defeat" for Iran, thereby putting Washington at least part way toward fulfilling the seven-country demolition job discussed by Wesley Clark.

"So long as Syrian jihadis are committed to fighting Iran and its Arab proxies," the article concluded, "we should quietly root for them - while keeping our distance from a conflict that is going to get very ugly before the smoke clears. There will be plenty of time to tame the beast after Iran's regional hegemonic ambitions have gone down in flames."

Deals with the Devil

The U.S. would settle with the jihadis only after the jihadis had settled with Assad. The good would ultimately outweigh the bad. This kind of self-centered moral calculus would not have mattered had Gambill only spoken for himself. But he didn't. Rather, he was expressing the viewpoint of Official Washington in general, which is why the ultra-respectable FP ran his piece in the first place.



Saudi King Salman bids farewell to President Barack Obama at Erga Palace after a state visit to Saudi Arabia on Jan. 27, 2015. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

The Islamists were something America could employ to their advantage and then throw away like a squeezed lemon. A few Syrians would suffer, but America would win, and that's all that counts.

The parallels with the DIA are striking. "The west, gulf countries, and Turkey support the opposition," the intelligence report declared, even though "the Salafist[s], the Muslim Brotherhood, and AQI [i.e. Al Qaeda in Iraq] are the major forces driving the insurgency."

Where Gambill predicted that "Assad and his minions will likely retreat to northwestern Syria," the DIA speculated that the jihadis might establish "a declared or undeclared Salafist principality" at the other end of the country near cities like Hasaka and Der Zor (also known as Deir ez-Zor).

Where the FP said that the ultimate aim was to roll back Iranian influence and undermine Shi'ite rule, the DIA said that a Salafist principality "is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of Shia expansion (Iraq and Iran)."

Bottle up the Shi'ites in northwestern Syria, in other words, while encouraging Sunni extremists to establish a base in the east so as to put pressure on Shi'ite-influenced Iraq and Shi'ite-ruled Iran.

As Gambill put it: "Whatever misfortunes Sunni Islamists may visit upon the Syrian people, *any* government they form will be strategically preferable to the Assad regime, for three reasons: A new government in Damascus will find continuing the alliance with Tehran unthinkable, it won't have to distract Syrians from its minority status with foreign policy adventurism like the *ancien régime*, and it will be flush with petrodollars from Arab Gulf states (relatively) friendly to Washington."

With the Saudis footing the bill, the U.S. would exercise untrammelled sway.

Disastrous Thinking

Has a forecast that ever gone more spectacularly wrong? Syria's Baathist government is hardly blameless in this affair. But thanks largely to the U.S.-backed sectarian

offensive, [400,000 Syrians or more](#) have died since Gambill's article appeared, with another 6.1 million displaced and an estimated 4.8 million fleeing abroad.

War-time destruction totals around [\\$250 billion](#), according to U.N. estimates, a staggering sum for a country of 18.8 million people where per-capita income prior to the outbreak of violence was under \$3,000. From Syria, the specter of sectarian violence has spread across Asia and Africa and into Europe and North America as well. Political leaders throughout the advanced industrial world are still struggling to contain the populist fury that the Middle East refugee crisis, the result of U.S.-instituted regime change, helped set off.

So instead of advancing U.S. policy goals, Gambill helped do the opposite. The Middle East is more explosive than ever while U.S. influence has fallen to sub-basement levels. Iranian influence now extends from the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean, while the country that now seems to be wobbling out of control is Saudi Arabia where Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman is lurching from one self-induced crisis to another. The country that Gambill counted on to shore up the status quo turns out to be undermining it.

It's not easy to screw things up so badly, but somehow Washington's bloated foreign-policy establishment has done it. Since helping to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, Gambill has moved on to a post at the rightwing Middle East Forum where Daniel Pipes, the group's founder and chief, now inveighs against the same [Sunni ethnic cleansing](#) that his employee defended or at least apologized for.

The forum is particularly well known for its Campus Watch program, which targets academic critics of Israel, Islamists, and – despite Gambill's kind words about “suicide bombings and roadside bombs” – anyone it considers the least bit apologetic about Islamic terrorism.

Double your standard, double the fun. Terrorism, it seems, is only terrorism when others do it to the U.S., not when the U.S. does it to others.

Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including [The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy](#) (Harcourt Brace).

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