

‘Al Qaeda Is on Our Side’: How Obama/Biden Team Empowered Terrorist Networks in Syria

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Hours after the Feb. 3 U.S. military raid in northern Syria that left the leader of ISIS and multiple family members dead, President Biden delivered a triumphant White House address.

The late-night Special Forces operation in Syria’s Idlib province, Biden proclaimed, was a

“testament to America’s reach and capability to take out terrorist threats no matter where they hide around the world.”

Unmentioned by the president, and virtually all media accounts of the assassination, was the critical role that top members of his administration played during the Obama years in creating the Al Qaeda-controlled hideout where ISIS head Abu Ibrahim al-Qurayshi, as well as his slain predecessor, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, found their final refuge.

In waging a multi-billion dollar covert war in support of the insurgency against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, top Obama officials who now serve under Biden made it American policy to enable and arm terrorist groups that attracted jihadi fighters from across the globe. This regime change campaign, undertaken one decade after Al Qaeda attacked the U.S. on 9/11, helped a sworn U.S. enemy establish the Idlib safe haven that it still controls today.

A concise articulation came from Jake Sullivan to his then-State Department boss Hillary Clinton [in a February 2012 email](#): “AQ [Al Qaeda] is on our side in Syria.”

Sullivan, the current national security adviser, is one of many officials who oversaw the Syria proxy war under Obama to now occupy a senior post under Biden. This group includes Secretary of State Antony Blinken, climate envoy John Kerry, USAID Administrator Samantha Power, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, NSC Middle East coordinator Brett McGurk, and State Department Counselor Derek Chollet.

Their efforts to remake the Middle East via regime change, not just in Syria but earlier in Libya, led to the deaths of Americans – including Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other U.S. officials in Benghazi in 2012; the slaughter of countless civilians; the creation of millions of refugees; and ultimately, Russia’s entry into the Syrian battlefield.

Contacted through their current U.S. government agencies, none of the Obama-Biden principals offered comment on their policy of supporting an Al Qaeda-dominated insurgency in Syria.

The Obama-Biden team’s record in Syria resonates today as many of its members handle the unfolding crisis in Ukraine. As in Syria, the U.S. is flooding a chaotic war zone with weapons in a dangerous proxy conflict with Russia, with long-term ramifications that are impossible to foresee. “I deeply worry that what’s going to happen next is that we will see Ukraine turn into Syria,” Democratic Senator Chris Coons told CBS News on April 17.

Based on declassified documents, news reports, and scattered admissions of U.S. officials, this overlooked history of how the Obama-Biden team’s effort to oust the Assad regime – in concert with allies including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey – details the series of discrete decisions that ultimately led the U.S. to empower terror networks bent on its destruction.

Seizing Momentum – and Munitions – From Libya to Pursue Regime Change in Syria

The road to Al Qaeda’s control of the Syrian province of Idlib actually started hundreds of miles across the Mediterranean in Libya.

In March 2011, after heavy lobbying from senior officials including Secretary Hillary Clinton, President Obama authorized a bombing campaign in support of the jihadist insurgency fighting the government of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. Backed by NATO firepower, the rebels toppled Gaddafi and gruesomely murdered him in October.

Buoyed by their quick success in Libya, the Obama administration set their sights on Damascus, by then a top regime change target in Washington. According to former NATO commander Wesley Clark, the Assad regime – a key ally of U.S. foes Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia – was marked for overthrow alongside Iraq in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. A leaked [2006 U.S. Embassy in Damascus cable](#) assessed that Assad’s “vulnerabilities” included “the potential threat to the regime from the increasing presence of transiting Islamist extremists,” and detailed how the U.S. could “improve the likelihood of such opportunities arising.”

The outbreak of the Syrian insurgency in March 2011, coupled with the fall of Gaddafi, offered the U.S. a historic opportunity to exploit Syria’s vulnerabilities. While the Arab Spring sparked peaceful Syrian protests against the ruling Ba’ath party’s cronyism and repression, it also triggered a largely Sunni, rural-based revolt that took a sectarian and violent turn. The U.S. and its allies, namely Qatar and Turkey, capitalized by tapping the massive arsenal of the newly ousted Libyan government.

“During the immediate aftermath of, and following the uncertainty caused by, the downfall of the [Gaddafi] regime in October 2011,” the Defense Intelligence Agency [reported the following year](#), “...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 redacted DIA document, [obtained by the group Judicial Watch](#), does not specify whether the U.S. was directly involved in these shipments. But it contains significant clues. With remarkable specificity, it detailed the size and contents of one such shipment in August 2012: 500 sniper rifles, 100 rocket-propelled grenade launchers with 300 rounds, and 400 howitzer missiles.

Most tellingly, the document noted that the weapons shipments were halted “in early September 2012.” This was a clear reference to the killing by militants that month of four Americans – Ambassador Christopher Stevens, another State Department official, and two CIA contractors – in Benghazi, the port city where the weapons to Syria were coming from. The Benghazi annex “was at its heart a CIA operation,” U.S. officials [told the Wall Street Journal](#). At least two dozen CIA employees worked in Benghazi under diplomatic cover.

Although top intelligence officials obscured the Benghazi operation in sworn testimony before the House Intelligence Committee, a Senate investigation eventually confirmed a direct CIA role in the movement of weapons from Libya to Syria. A classified version of a 2014 Senate report, not publicly released, documented an agreement between President Obama and Turkey to funnel weapons from Libya to insurgents in Syria. The operation, established in early 2012, was run by then-CIA Director David Petraeus.

“The [Benghazi] consulate’s only mission was to provide cover for the moving of arms” to Syria, a former U.S. intelligence official told journalist Seymour Hersh [in the London Review of Books](#). “It had no real political role.”

The Death of a U.S. Ambassador

Image on the right: J. [Christopher Stevens](#) — United States ambassador to Libya from June 7, 2012 until killed in an [attack on the US consulate in Benghazi](#), on September 12, 2012. (Licensed under the public domain)



Under diplomatic cover, Stevens appears to have been a significant figure in the CIA program. More than one year before he became ambassador in June 2012, Stevens was appointed the U.S. liaison to the Libyan opposition. In this role, he worked with the Al Qaeda-tied Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and its leader, Abdelhakim Belhadj, a warlord who

fought alongside Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. After Gaddafi's ouster, Belhadj was [named head of the Tripoli Military Council](#), which controlled security in the country's capital.

Belhadj's portfolio was not limited to post-coup Libya. In November 2011, the Al Qaeda ally traveled to Turkey to meet with leaders of the Free Syrian Army, the CIA-backed opposition military coalition. Belhadj's trip came as part of the new Libyan government's effort to provide "money and weapons to the growing insurgency against Bashar al-Assad," the [London Telegraph](#) reported at the time. On September 14, 2012 – just three days after Stevens and his American colleagues were killed – the [London Times](#) revealed that a Libyan vessel "carrying the largest consignment of weapons for Syria since the uprising began," had recently docked in the Turkish port of Iskenderun. Once unloaded, "most of its cargo is making its way to rebels on the front lines."

The known details of Stevens' last hours on September 11 suggest that shipping weapons was at the top of his agenda. Although based in Tripoli and facing violent threats, he nonetheless made the dangerous trek to Benghazi around the fraught anniversary of 9/11. According to a [2016 report from the House Intelligence Committee](#), one of Stevens' last scheduled meetings was with the head of al-Marfa Shipping and Maritime Services Company, a Libyan firm involved in ferrying weapons to Syria. His final meeting of the day was with Consul General Ali Sait Akin of Turkey, where the weapons were shipped. [Fox News later reported](#) that "Stevens was in Benghazi to negotiate a weapons transfer."

With the Libyan channel shut down by Stevens' murder, the U.S. and its allies turned to other sources. One was Croatia, where Saudi Arabia [financed a major weapons purchase in late 2012](#) that was [arranged by the CIA](#).

The CIA's use of the Saudi kingdom's vast coffers [continued an arrangement](#) from prior covert proxy wars, including the arming of the mujahideen in Afghanistan and of the Contras in Nicaragua.

Although the Obama administration claimed that the weapons funneled to Syria were intended for "moderate rebels," they ultimately ended up in the hands of a jihadi-dominated insurgency. Just one month after the Benghazi attack, the [New York Times reported](#) that "hard-line Islamic jihadists," including groups "with ties or affiliations with Al Qaeda," have received "the lion's share of the arms shipped to the Syrian opposition."

Covertly Arming An Al Qaeda-Dominated Insurgency

The Obama administration did not need media accounts to learn that jihadists dominated the Syrian insurgency on the receiving end of a CIA supply chain.

One month before the Benghazi attack, Pentagon intelligence analysts gave the White House a blunt appraisal. An August 2012 [Defense Intelligence Agency report](#), disseminated widely among U.S. officials, noted that "Salafi[s], the Muslim Brotherhood, and AQI [Al Qaeda in Iraq] are the major forces driving the insurgency." Al Qaeda, the report stressed, "supported the Syrian opposition from the beginning." Their aim was to create a "Salafist principality in eastern Syria" – an early warning of the ISIS caliphate that would be established two years later.

General Michael Flynn, who headed the DIA at the time, [later recalled](#) that his staff "got enormous pushback" from the Obama White House. "I felt that they did not want to hear the

truth,” Flynn said. In 2015, one year after Flynn was forced out, dozens of Pentagon intelligence analysts signed on to a complaint alleging that top Pentagon intelligence officials were “[cooking the books](#)” to paint a rosier picture of [the jihadi](#) presence in Syria. (The Pentagon [later cleared CENTCOM commanders of wrongdoing](#).)

The Free Syrian Army (FSA), the main CIA-backed insurgent force, also informed Obama officials of the jihadi dominance in their ranks. “From the reports we get from the doctors,” FSA officials [told the State Department in November 2012](#), “most of the injured and dead FSA are Jabhat al-Nusra, due to their courage and [the fact they are] always at the front line.”

Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Nusra Front) is Al Qaeda’s franchise in Syria. It emerged as a splinter group of Al Qaeda in Iraq after a falling out between AQI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and his then-deputy, Mohammed al-Jolani. In 2013, Baghdadi relaunched his organization under the name of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Jolani led his Syria-based Al Qaeda faction under the black flag of al-Nusra.

“[W]hile rarely acknowledged explicitly in public,” Charles Lister, a Gulf state-funded analyst in close contact with Syrian insurgent groups [wrote in March 2015](#), “the vast majority of the Syrian insurgency has coordinated closely with Al-Qaeda since mid-2012 – and to great effect on the battlefield.” As one Free Syrian Army leader told [the New York Times](#): “No FSA faction in the north can operate without al-Nusra’s approval.”

According to David McCloskey, a former CIA analyst who covered Syria in the war’s early years, U.S. officials knew that “al-Qaeda affiliated groups and Salafi jihadist groups were the primary engine of the insurgency.” This, McCloskey says, was “a tremendously problematic aspect of the conflict.”

In his memoir, senior Obama aide Ben Rhodes acknowledged that al-Nusra “was probably the strongest fighting force within the opposition.” It was also clear, he wrote, that U.S.-backed insurgent groups were “fighting side by side with al-Nusra.” For this reason, Rhodes recalled, he argued against the State Department’s December 2012 designation of al-Nusra as a foreign terrorist organization. This move “would alienate the same people we want to help.” (Asked about wanting to help an Al Qaeda-dominated insurgency, Rhodes did not respond).

In fact, designating al-Nusra as a terror organization allowed the Obama administration to publicly claim that it opposed Al Qaeda’s Syria branch while continuing to covertly arm the insurgency that it dominated. Three months after adding al-Nusra to the terrorism list, the U.S. and its allies “dramatically stepped up weapons supplies to Syrian rebels” to help “rebels to try and seize Damascus,” the Associated Press [reported in March 2013](#).

‘There Was No Moderate Middle’

Harvard 2014: Biden goes off-script, revealing the truth of U.S. support for jihadists in Syria.

Despite being privately aware of Nusra’s dominance, Obama administration officials continued to publicly insist that the U.S. was only supporting Syria’s “moderate opposition,” as then-Deputy National Security Adviser Antony Blinken [described it in September 2014](#).

But speaking to a Harvard audience days later, then-Vice President Biden blurted out the

concealed reality. In the Syrian insurgency, “there was no moderate middle,” [Biden admitted](#). Instead, U.S. “allies” in Syria “poured hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad.” Those weapons were supplied, Biden said, to “al-Nusra, and Al-Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world.”

Biden [quickly apologized for his comments](#), which appeared to fit the classic definition of the Kinsley [gaffe](#): a politician inadvertently telling the truth. Biden’s only error was omitting his administration’s critical role in helping its allies arm the jihadis.

Rather than shut down a CIA program that was aiding the Al Qaeda-dominated insurgency, Obama expanded it. In [April 2013](#), the president signed an order that amended the CIA’s covert war, codenamed Timber Sycamore, to allow direct U.S. arming and training. After tapping Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar to fund its arms pipeline for insurgents inside Syria, Obama’s order allowed the CIA to directly furnish U.S.-made weapons. Just as with the regime change campaign in Libya, a key architect of this operation [was Hillary Clinton](#).

Obama’s upgraded proxy war in Syria proved to be “one of the costliest covert action programs in the history of the C.I.A.,” the [New York Times](#) reported in 2017. Documents leaked by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed a budget of nearly \$1 billion per year, or around \$1 of every \$15 in CIA spending. The CIA armed and trained nearly 10,000 insurgents, spending “roughly \$100,000 per year for every anti-Assad rebel who has gone through the program,” U.S. officials [told the Washington Post](#) in 2015. Two years later, [one U.S. official estimated](#) that CIA-funded militias “may have killed or wounded 100,000 Syrian soldiers and their allies over the past four years.”

But these militias were not just killing pro-Syrian government forces. As [the New York Times reported in April 2017](#), US-backed insurgents carried out “sectarian mass murder.”

One such act of mass murder came in August 2013, when the U.S.-backed Free Syrian Army joined an al-Nusra and ISIS offensive on Alawite areas of Latakia. A [Human Rights Investigation](#) found that the insurgents engaged in “the systematic killing of entire families,” slaughtering a documented 190 civilians, including 57 women, 18 children, and 14 elderly men. In a video from the field, former Syrian army general Salim Idriss, head of the U.S.-backed Supreme Military Council (SMC), bragged that “we are cooperating to a great extent in this operation.”

The Latakia massacres came four months after the U.S. ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, [hailed](#) Idriss and his fighters as “the moderate and responsible elements of the armed opposition.” The role of Idriss’s forces in the slaughter did not cancel the administration’s endorsement. In October, the [Washington Post revealed](#) that the “CIA is expanding a clandestine effort ... aimed at shoring up the fighting power of units aligned with the Supreme Military Council, an umbrella organization led by [Idriss] that is the main recipient of U.S. support.”

[After this article was published, RCI received Ford’s email response to our request for comment. Ford wrote that there was “no question” that the U.S.-backed Free Syrian Army engaged in war crimes but noted, “We denounced [them] publicly at the time and in private.” Ford said the administration’s official stance that moderates were engaged in the fight was accurate in light of the facts on the ground. “Our definition of moderates in the armed opposition,” he wrote, “were people willing to negotiate a peaceful end to the war.”]

Officially, the upgraded CIA program barred direct support to al-Nusra or its allies in Syria. But once U.S. weapons arrived in Syria, the Obama administration recognized that it had no way of controlling their use – an apparent motive for waging the program covertly. “We needed plausible deniability in case the arms got into the hands of al-Nusra,” a former senior administration official [told the New York Times in 2013](#).

One area where U.S. arms got into al-Nusra’s hands was the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib. Al Qaeda leaders would ultimately control and – though the group disputes it – provide ISIS leaders sanctuary there.

‘Al-Qaeda’s Largest Safe Haven Since 9/11’

In May 2015, an array of insurgent groups, dubbed the Jaish al-Fatah (“Army of Conquest”) coalition, captured Idlib province from the Syrian government. The fight was led by al-Nusra, and showcased what Charles Lister, the D.C.-based analyst with contacts to insurgents in Syria, [dubbed](#) “a far improved level of coordination” between rival militants, including the U.S.-backed FSA and multiple “jihadist factions.”

For Lister, the conquest of Idlib also revealed that the U.S. and its allies “changed their tune regarding coordination with Islamists.” Citing multiple battlefield commanders, Lister reported that “the U.S.-led operations room in southern Turkey,” which coordinated support to U.S.-backed insurgent groups, “was instrumental in facilitating their involvement in the operation” led by al-Nusra. While the insurgents’ U.S.-led command had previously opposed “any direct coordination” with jihadist groups, the Idlib offensive “demonstrated something different,” Lister concluded: To capture the province, U.S. officials “specifically encouraged a closer cooperation with Islamists commanding frontline operations.”

The U.S.-approved battlefield cooperation in Idlib allowed al-Nusra fighters to directly benefit from U.S. weapons. Despite occasional flare-ups between them, al-Nusra was able to use U.S.-backed insurgent groups “as force multipliers,” the Institute for the Study of War, a prominent D.C. think tank, [observed when the battle began](#). Insurgent military gains, Foreign Policy [reported in April 2015](#), were achieved “thanks in large part to suicide bombers and American anti-tank TOW missiles.”

The jihadist-led victory in Idlib quickly subjected its residents to sectarian terror. In June 2015, al-Nusra fighters [massacred at least 20 members of the Druze faith](#). Hundreds of villagers spared in the attack were forced to convert to Sunni Islam. Facing the same threats, nearly all of Idlib’s remaining 1,200 Christians fled the province, leaving a Christian population that reportedly totals [just three people](#) today.

In a [2017 post-mortem](#) on the Obama administration’s covert war in Syria, the New York Times described the insurgents’ conquest of Idlib as among the CIA program’s “periods of success.” This was certainly the case for Al Qaeda.

“Idlib Province,” Brett McGurk, the anti-ISIS envoy under Obama and Trump, and now Biden’s top White House official for the Middle East, [said in 2017](#), “is the largest Al Qaeda safe haven since 9/11.”

U.S. Allows ISIS Takeover

Al Qaeda is not the only sectarian death squad that managed to establish a safe haven in the chaos of the Syria proxy war. Starting in 2013, al-Nusra’s sister-turned-rival group, ISIS,

seized considerable territory of its own. As with Al Qaeda, ISIS' land-grab in Syria received a significant backdoor assist from Washington.

Before Al Qaeda captured Idlib, the first ISIS stronghold in Syria, Raqqa, grew out of a similar alliance between U.S.-backed "moderate rebels" and jihadis. After this coalition seized the city from the Syrian government in March 2013, ISIS took full control in November.

When ISIS declared its caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq in June 2014, the U.S. launched an air campaign against the group's strongholds. But the Obama administration's anti-ISIS offensive contained a significant exception. In key areas where ISIS's advance could threaten the Assad regime, the U.S. watched it happen.

In April 2015, just as al-Nusra was conquering Idlib, ISIS seized major parts of the Yarmouk refugee camp on the outskirts of Damascus, marking what the [New York Times called](#) the group's "greatest inroads yet" into the Syrian capital.

In the ancient city of Palmyra, the U.S. allowed an outright ISIS takeover. "[A]s Islamic State closed in on Palmyra, the U.S.-led aerial coalition that has been pummeling Islamic State in Syria for the past 18 months took no action to prevent the extremists' advance toward the historic town – which, until then, had remained in the hands of the sorely overstretched Syrian security forces," the Los Angeles Times [reported in March 2016](#).

In [a leaked conversation](#) with Syrian opposition activists months later, then-Secretary of State John Kerry explained the U.S. rationale for letting ISIS advance.

"Daesh [ISIS] was threatening the possibility of going to Damascus and so forth," Kerry explained. "And we know that this was growing. We were watching. We saw that Daesh was growing in strength, and we thought Assad was threatened. We thought, however, we could probably manage, that Assad would then negotiate" his way out of power.

In short, the U.S. was leveraging ISIS's growth to impose regime change on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The U.S. strategy of "watching" ISIS's advance in Syria, Kerry also admitted, directly caused Russia's 2015 entry into the conflict. The threat of an ISIS takeover, Kerry said, is "why Russia went in. Because they didn't want a Daesh government."

Russia's military intervention in Syria prevented the ISIS government in Damascus that Kerry and fellow Obama administration principals had been willing to risk. Pulverizing Russian airstrikes also dealt a fatal blow to the Al Qaeda-dominated insurgency that the Obama team had spent billions of dollars to support.

From U.S. Enemy to 'Asset' in Syria

With U.S.-backed fighters vanquished and one of their main champions, Hillary Clinton, defeated in the November 2016 election, the CIA operation in Syria met what [the New York Times called](#) a "sudden death." After criticizing the proxy war in Syria on the campaign trail, President Trump shut down the Timber Sycamore program for good in July 2017.

"It turns out it's – a lot of al-Qaeda we're giving these weapons to," Trump told [the Wall Street Journal that month](#).

With the exit of the Obama-Biden team, the U.S. was no longer fighting on Al Qaeda's side. But that did not mean that the U.S. was prepared to confront the enemy that it had helped install in Idlib.

While Trump put an end to the CIA proxy war, his efforts to further extricate the U.S. from Syria by withdrawing troops [were thwarted by senior officials](#) who shared the preceding administration's regime change goals.

"When President Trump said 'I want everybody out of Syria,' the top brass at Pentagon and State had aneurysms," Christopher Miller, the Acting Secretary of Defense during Trump's last months in office, recalls.

Jim Jeffrey, Trump's envoy for Syria, admitted to deceiving the president in order to keep in place "a lot more than" the 200 U.S. troops that Trump had reluctantly agreed to. "We were always playing shell games to not make clear to our leadership how many troops we had there," [Jeffrey told Defense One](#). Those "shell games" have put U.S. soldiers in harm's way, including four servicemembers [recently wounded in a rocket attack](#) on their base in northeastern Syria.

While thwarting a full U.S. troop withdrawal, Jeffrey and other senior officials have also preserved the U.S. government's tacit alliance with Idlib's Al-Qaeda rulers. Officially, al-Nusra remains on the U.S. terrorism list. Despite several name changes, the [State Department has dismissed its rebranding efforts](#) as a "vehicle to advance its position in the Syrian uprising and to further its own goals as an al-Qa'ida affiliate."

But in practice, as [Jeffrey explained last year](#), the U.S. has treated Al-Nusra as "an asset" to U.S. strategy in Syria. "They are the least bad option of the various options on Idlib, and Idlib is one of the most important places in Syria, which is one of the most important places right now in the Middle East," he said. Jeffrey also revealed that he had communicated with al-Nusra leader Mohammed al-Jolani via "indirect channels."

Jeffrey's comments underscore a profound shift in the U.S. government's Middle East strategy as a result of the Syria proxy war: The Syrian branch of Al Qaeda, the terror group that attacked the U.S. on 9/11, and which then became the target of a global war on terror aimed at destroying it, is no longer seen by powerful officials in Washington as an enemy, but an "asset."

Since retaking office under Biden, the Obama veterans who targeted Syria with one of the most expensive covert wars in history have deprioritized the war-torn nation. While pledging to [maintain crippling sanctions](#) and [keep U.S. troops at multiple bases](#), as well as announcing sporadic airstrikes, the White House has otherwise said little publicly about its Syria policy. The U.S. military raid that ended ISIS leader al-Qurayshi's life in February prompted the only Syria-focused speech of Biden's presidency.

While Biden trumpeted the lethal operation, the fact that it occurred in Idlib underscores a contradiction that his administration has yet to address. By taking out an ISIS leader in Al Qaeda's Syria stronghold, the president and his top officials are now confronting threats from a terror safe haven that they helped create.

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