

Trump's Halt to CIA Backing For Syrian Rebels Appeases Pentagon, Not Russia

The Pentagon, which never liked the CIA program, now gets to run the entire US war in Syria by itself

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The Washington Post is [reporting](#) that Trump has “decided to end” CIA’s program to funnel arms, money and training to Syria’s largely Islamist rebels.

There’s a couple of things to say about that.

1. We’re going to need confirmation that this has indeed happened. Ideally from people who have a direct line to some of the CIA-backed groups.
2. Is this the definite end of the CIA program, or a temporary halt? The aid was [already frozen once before](#), in February-March of this year, but was then restored.
3. Is the end of CIA backing going to be coupled with instructions to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey to stop their aid to rebels as well? Seeing how inclined the US is to appease the Saudis, and how fast its influence over Turkey is shrinking, I don’t see it.
4. Will the end of the CIA program be coupled with increased aid to the rebels by the Pentagon? Will the CIA-backed groups actually be cut off, or just go from CIA-backed to Pentagon-backed? That’s a particularly pertinent question for southeastern Syria around al-Tanf where Pentagon-backed groups like *Commandos of the Revolution* rub shoulders with CIA-backed groups like *Lions of the East*. Many of these CIA-backed groups were trained by US Special Forces hired out to the CIA, so links between them and the US military already exist.

The Washington Post and the rest of the establishment media want to paint this decision as Trump appeasing Russia, but that is highly unlikely. There are a number of far better reasons why it came to this.

1. This is the natural evolution of the trajectory the US was already on since mid-2016. Recall that in September 2016 under the Kerry-Lavrov deal the US basically [agreed to enter the war](#) against extremist elements of the Syrian Islamist rebellion. Also recall that just before leaving office Obama [sent B-52s against Jabhat al-Nusra](#) and claimed over 100 killed.
2. Trump has been an outspoken opponent of US backing for Syrian rebels for years. You only need to glance at his Twitter to see that.

Remember, all these ‘freedom fighters’ in Syria want to fly planes into our buildings.

— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [August 28, 2013](#)

3. The US military, which between Mattis and McMaster is highly influential in the Trump administration, never liked the CIA program. Recall [the bombshell Seymour Hersh story](#) from 2015 detailing how the *Joint Chiefs of Staff* and the *Defense Intelligence Agency* kept warning the Obama administration that toppling Assad would lead to chaos and possible takeover by jihadis. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Martin Dempsey went so far as to secretly leak information on jihadis to the Russians, while the DIA chief, Mike Flynn was sacked when he made his opposition public.

4. The new CIA director was not wedded to the program. The Washington Post says the decision CIA would stop funneling arms into Syria was made by General McMaster and CIA’s new chief, Mike Pompeo. Even within the CIA, John Brennan, its director under Obama, was probably the biggest supporter of what was dubbed sardonically “Brennan’s war”. It was his pet project and he was the driving force behind it. Almost whoever was going to replace Brennan was likely to at least scale it down.

5. Along with increased infighting between the rebels, particularly in their main territory in Idlib, there has been consolidation of the rebel groups into two rival blocs, both of them led by salafist jihadists. Continuing to arm the rebels now would at best mean directly arming Ahrar al-Sham, whose leadership includes former al-Qaeda members, and which used to be extremely cozy with Syrian al-Qaeda (Jabhat al-Nusra).

An end to the CIA fanning the flames of war in Syria is a good thing, but it doesn’t mean the US is retreating from the country. It only means the reigns have been handed over to the Pentagon. The Pentagon has pursued a more rational course in Syria than the CIA, but it has been, if anything, even more heavy-handed.

Recently there has been [a dramatic upsurge](#) in Pentagon deliveries of military aid to the secessionist Syrian Kurds, along with an upsurge in [US base building in Syria](#), in part to accommodate the transport planes hauling in this vast aid.

Also we’ve seen the US military [repeatedly bomb the Syrian armed forces](#), [cruise missiled one of its airbases](#), and [shoot down one of its jets](#).

With Pentagon fully in control of US Syria policy regime change is finally out completely, but the danger of a US-orchestrated partition and permanent occupation of the east only increases.

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