

ON THAT ACKNOWLEDGED COVERT OP IN SYRIA

The NYT has a tick-tock of Obama's Syria policy. I find it fascinating for two reasons.

Obama uses "covert" status as a legal fiction, nothing more

First, consider the coverage of the covert op – one acknowledged explicitly by Chuck Hagel in Senate testimony. NYT says President Obama actually signed the Finding authorizing arming the rebels in April, not June, as Hagel claimed, but Obama did not move to implement it right away.

President Obama had signed a secret order in April – months earlier than previously reported – authorizing a C.I.A. plan to begin arming the Syrian rebels.

Indeed, the story may have been driven by CIA types trying to blame Obama for indolence after first signing that finding.

As to the decision to do this as a covert op, NYT describes it arose – first of all – out of difficulties over using the Armed Forces to overthrow a sovereign government.

But debate had shifted from whether to arm Syrian rebels to how to do it. Discussions about putting the Pentagon in charge of the program – and publicly acknowledging the arming and training program – were eventually shelved when it was decided that too many legal hurdles stood in the way of the United States' openly supporting the overthrow of a sovereign government.

Those difficulties, of course, were the same

ones present that should have prevented Obama from considering bombing a sovereign government in August, which of course weren't the ones that ultimately persuaded Obama not to bomb.

The big reason to do it as a covert op, however, came from the need to be able to deny we were arming al Qaeda-linked rebels.

Besides the legal worries, there were other concerns driving the decision to make the program a secret.

As one former senior administration official put it, "We needed plausible deniability in case the arms got into the hands of Al Nusra."

Yet in spite of this explanation – one which you'd think would demand secrecy – the NYT notes that Ben Rhodes went and announced this policy publicly.

But, the NYT notes (perhaps in anticipation for the inevitable FOIA), the President didn't say anything about it himself.

Where the hell was the IC getting its rosy scenario about Assad's overthrow?

The other striking thing about the story is how it portrays Obama's policies to have been driven by (unquestioned by the NYT) overly rosy assessments of Assad's demise.

It starts by portraying the 2011 belief Bashar al-Assad would fall as a near certainty (note the NYT doesn't mention the other regimes – Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Yemen, among others, that haven't fallen either).

At first, the future of Syria did not seem so complicated – nobody believed that Mr. Assad would survive.

In the summer of 2011, the momentum of the Arab uprisings appeared to be sweeping all before it. Gone were the dictators of Tunisia and Egypt, and in

Libya, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi would fall later in the year.

American intelligence agencies gave regular briefings at the White House and the State Department concluding that Mr. Assad's days were numbered, and on Aug. 18, 2011, Mr. Obama released a statement declaring that "the time has come for President Assad to step aside."

Then, in summer 2012, NYT says, intelligence services got word Assad was moving his CW (note, no mention here of whether that influenced the IC judgment on Assad's longevity or whether they explained why he hadn't fallen in the interim year, nor is there mention of NYT's earlier reporting that the IC thought this might reflect dissension in Assad's ranks).

By late summer 2012, however, American intelligence agencies began picking up communications with ominous signals that Mr. Assad's military was moving chemical weapons and possibly mixing them in preparation for use.

There's also no mention – even though it discusses the Libya intervention generally – of the chaos that had already overtaken Libya by that point, to say nothing of the way Benghazi and its politicization might have made Obama think twice of arming rebels to overthrow a dictator. That is, Libya is presented as an example solely of mission creep, not as an example of how a David Petraeus-led scheme had failed to achieve stability and may have fostered terrorism.

By that point, at least, folks in State were beginning to wise up about Assad's longevity.

Much of the department's time was now being devoted to what was called the "post-Assad project," the planning for political transition in Syria. Many State Department officials began to

dismiss the project as a useless academic exercise. They believed that its premise – that Mr. Assad's government was on the verge of collapse – was becoming outdated.

It took until the beginning of 2013 – at least as portrayed by NYT – before the IC copped on that Assad was actually doing better than the rebels.

But a new American intelligence assessment at the beginning of 2013 revived the discussions about whether to give arms to the rebels.

In a reversal from what spy agencies had been telling administration officials for more than a year, the new assessment concluded that Mr. Assad's government was in no danger of collapsing, and that Syrian troops were gaining the upper hand in the civil war. The pace of Syrian Army defections had slowed, and Iranian munitions shipments had replenished the stocks of army units that had once complained of shortages in arms and ammunition.

The opposite was true for the rebels, who were running out of ammunition and supplies. Morale was low, American spy agencies concluded, and Qaeda-linked groups like the Nusra Front were becoming increasingly dominant in the rebellion.

The key development that persuaded Obama to act, however, was a June State Department report. In its specific reference, the NYT highlights the plight of Salim Idris, who never really had the chance of being the moderate leader the Americans wanted him to be, but the NYT doesn't admit that.

The rebellion was collapsing, and a classified State Department briefing

paper on June 10, which mentioned the rebel commander Gen. Salim Idris, painted a grim picture.

"We are headed toward our worst case scenario: rebel gains evaporating, the moderate opposition – including Salim Idriss – imploding, large ungoverned spaces, Assad holding on indefinitely, neighbors endangered, and Iran, Hizbollah, and Iraqi militias taking root," the paper concluded.

But this seems to be the same document cited in the lede of the article, one which the NYT has apparently been coached to use to suggest Obama could have prevented the CW attack of August 21.

With rebel forces in Syria in retreat and the Obama administration's policy toward the war-ravaged country in disarray, Secretary of State John Kerry arrived at the White House Situation Room one day in June with a document bearing a warning. President Bashar al-Assad of Syria had used chemical weapons against his people, the document said, and if the United States did not "impose consequences," Mr. Assad would see it as a "green light for continued CW use."

That is, this progression mainly serves in this tale as the basis to blame Obama for the CW attack. Not as further evidence the IC was woefully late in figuring out the rebels they had invested in weren't as strongly situated as they had claim (and, indeed, as the entire narrative would need them to be to make sense).

Now, I'm not saying I wrote a treatise in June 2011 predicting Assad would outlast the rebels. But there were clear signs the west – largely led by credulous press – was overestimating the strength of the rebellion in Syria. Seeing them, however, required challenging rebel propaganda and accessing sources outside of the US bubble.

Did no one in the intelligence establishment do that? Has the US been so entranced by the propaganda of those aiming to use the Arab Spring as an opportunity to expand their influence that no one questioned the rosy assumptions until far into the plan?

What the NYT pitches as a story of Obama's failure is, rather, a picture of continued failures by our intelligence community (including those close to David Petraeus, who is a likely source for the pitched narrative).