

REVISITING DAVID PETRAEUS' CRACK PLAN TO ALLY WITH AL QAEDA

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing on
potential airstrikes against Assad, September 3,
2013

SEN. CORKER: What I'm unaware of is why it is so slow in actually helping them with lethal support – why has that been so slow?

SEC. KERRY: I think – I think, Senator, we need to have that discussion tomorrow in classified session. We can talk about some components of that. Suffice it to say, I want to General Dempsey to speak to this, maybe Secretary Hagel. That is increasing significantly. It has increased in its competency. I think it's made leaps and bounds over the course of the last few months.

Secretary Hagel, do you – or General, do you want to –

SEN. HAGEL: I would only add that it was June of this year that the president made a decision to support lethal assistance to the opposition, as you all know. We have been very supportive with hundreds of millions of dollars of nonlethal assistance. The vetting process, as Secretary Kerry noted, has been significant. But – I'll ask General Dempsey if he wants to add anything – but we, Department of Defense, have not been directly involved in this. This is, as you know, a covert action, and as Secretary Kerry noted, probably to go into much more detail would require a closed or classified hearing.

Everybody's well aware there's been a covert operation, operating in the region to train forces, moderate forces, to go into Syria and to be out there, that we've been doing this the last two years. And probably the most true measure of the effectiveness of moderate forces would be, what has been the effectiveness over that last two years of this covert operation, of training 2,000 to 3,000 of these moderates? Are they a growing force? Have they gained ground? How effective are they? What can you tell us about this effort that's gone on, and has it been a part of the success that you see that you're presenting this new plan on?

A number of us were discussing how odd it was that this big NYT article – describing President Obama blame those who championed arming Syrian rebels – made no mention of the covert CIA operation dating back to 2012 (and confirmed in a public hearing to have started by June 2013). How could a NYT writer pretend the CIA training effort didn't proceed the DOD one, especially given the fairly lengthy reporting done by other NYT reporters on it? Especially given the Peter Baker's refutation of Obama's position pertains to whether Obama should have armed rebels earlier, which of course he did.

In effect, Mr. Obama is arguing that he reluctantly went along with those who said it was the way to combat the Islamic State, but that he never wanted to do it and has now has been vindicated in his original judgment. The I-told-you-so argument, of course, assumes that the idea of training rebels itself was flawed and not that it was started too late and executed ineffectively, as critics maintain.

Which is why I was interested in the blame-setting.

Hillary comes in for a large part of the blame, almost certainly justifiably (though she's also likely a stand-in for those on Obama's own staff who espouse intervention with little consideration of consequences). David Petraeus – CIA Director when arms first started flowing to Syria, though not when that April 2013 finding was signed – gets remarkably little blame, especially given the prominence Petraeus Godfather Jack Keane got in the piece.

The finger, it says, should be pointed not at Mr. Obama but at those who pressed him to attempt training Syrian rebels in the first place – a group that, in addition to congressional Republicans, happened to include former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

[snip]

The idea of bolstering Syrian rebels was debated from the early days of the civil war, which started in 2011. Mrs. Clinton, along with David H. Petraeus, then the C.I.A. director, and Leon E. Panetta, then the defense secretary, supported arming opposition forces, but the president worried about deep entanglement in someone else's war after the bloody experience in Iraq.

Perhaps most remarkably, our allies – Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – get no blame here, even in spite of the fact that they'd be funding more radical anti-Assad forces with our involvement or not (on that note, see this great tick tock of how we got here). Much of the reason our options remain so dismal in Syria is because our so-called allies are going to pursue their objectives whether or not we're playing along. Which leaves only the question of whether anything we could do would improve the outcome –

not to mention whether our interest coincides with that of our allies.

So with all that in mind, let's reconsider David Petraeus crack plan to start allying with al Qaeda to fight (he says) ISIS. As I noted at the time, he engaged in a lot of making shite up, including not only "the Surge" (which he will spin until his dying day), but also what he was doing at CIA.

I'm most interested in this claim:

Petraeus was the CIA director in early 2011 when the Syrian civil war erupted. At the time, he along with then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta reportedly urged the Obama administration to work with moderate opposition forces. The U.S. didn't, and many of those groups have since steered toward jihadist groups like the Nusra Front, which are better equipped and have had more success on the battlefield.

While it is true that Obama did not systematically arm rebels in Syria in 2011, it is also a public fact that the CIA was watching (and at least once doing more than that) Qatar and Saudi Arabia move arms from Libya before Petraeus' departure in 2012, and Obama approved a covert finding to arm "moderate" rebels in April 2013, with CIA implementing that plan in June.

That's all public and confirmed.

So how is it that we once again are pretending that the CIA – the agency Petraeus led as it oversaw a disastrous intervention in Libya that contributed

to radicalization both there and in
Syria – didn't arm purported moderates
who turned out not to be?

That is, Petraeus' plan to ally with al Qaeda
accompanies a false narrative about whether we
had supported rebels, including al Qaeda
affiliates, from the start.

The plan from those who got CIA to support
rebels in 2013 (and arm them even earlier) and
who kept pushing to train rebels after that is –
now that blame is being assigned for the second
attempt to arm them – to join with al Qaeda.
Which we effectively did years ago.

On top of everything else, its a nice way to
inoculate against what has happened, which is
and always was going to be about strengthening
Islamic fighters.