

THE COVERT OPERATION UNDERMINING US CREDIBILITY AGAINST ISIS

Over the weekend, the NYT had a story reporting the “conspiracy theory” popular among Iraqis that the US is behind ISIS.

The United States has conducted an escalating campaign of deadly airstrikes against the extremists of the Islamic State for more than a month. But that appears to have done little to tamp down the conspiracy theories still circulating from the streets of Baghdad to the highest levels of Iraqi government that the [C.I.A.](#) is secretly behind the same extremists that it is now attacking.

“We know about who made Daesh,” said Bahaa al-Araji, a deputy prime minister, using an Arabic shorthand for the Islamic State on Saturday at a demonstration called by the Shiite cleric Moktada al-Sadr to warn against the possible deployment of American ground troops. [Mr. Sadr publicly blamed the C.I.A.](#) for creating the Islamic State in a speech last week, and interviews suggested that most of the few thousand people at the demonstration, including dozens of members of Parliament, subscribed to the same theory.

[snip]

The prevalence of the theory in the streets underscored the deep suspicions of the American military’s return to Iraq more than a decade after its invasion, in 2003. The casual endorsement by a senior official,

though, was also a pointed reminder that the new Iraqi government may be an awkward partner for the American-led campaign to drive out the extremists.

It suggests the theory arises from lingering suspicions tied to our occupation of Iraq.

But, given the publicly available facts, is the theory so crazy?

Let me clear: I am not saying the US currently backs ISIS, as the NYT's headline but not story suggests is the conspiracy theory. Nor am I saying the US willingly built a terrorist state that would go on to found a caliphate in Iraq.

But it is a fact that the US has had a covert op since at least June 2013 funding Syrian opposition groups, many of them foreign fighters, in an effort to overthrow Bashar al-Assad. Chuck Hagel confirmed as much in Senate testimony on September 3, 2013 (the NYT subsequently reported that President Obama signed the finding authorizing the op in April 2013, but did not implement it right away). We relied on our Saudi and Qatari partners as go-betweens in that op and therefore relied on them to vet the recipient groups.

At least as Steve Clemons tells it, in addition to the more "moderate" liver-eaters in the Free Syrian Army, the Qataris were (are?) funding Jabhat al-Nusra, whereas Saudi prince Bandar bin Sultan gets credit for empowering ISIS – which is one of the reasons King Abdullah took the Syria portfolio away from him.

McCain was praising Prince Bandar bin Sultan, then the head of Saudi Arabia's intelligence services and a former ambassador to the United States, for supporting forces fighting Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. McCain and Senator Lindsey Graham had [previously met](#) with Bandar to encourage the Saudis to arm Syrian rebel forces.

But shortly after McCain's Munich comments, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah relieved Bandar of his Syrian covert-action portfolio, which was then transferred to Saudi Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef. By mid-April, just two weeks after President Obama met with King Abdullah on March 28, Bandar had also been removed from his position as head of Saudi intelligence—according to official government statements, at “his own request.” Sources close to the royal court told me that, in fact, the king fired Bandar over his handling of the kingdom's Syria policy and other simmering tensions, after initially refusing to accept Bandar's offers to resign.

[snip]

ISIS, in fact, may have been a major part of Bandar's covert-ops strategy in Syria. The Saudi government, for its part, has denied allegations, including claims made by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, that it has directly supported ISIS. But there are also signs that the kingdom recently shifted its assistance—whether direct or indirect—away from extremist factions in Syria and toward more moderate opposition groups.

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The worry at the time, punctuated by a February meeting between U.S. National Security Adviser Susan Rice and the intelligence chiefs of Turkey, Qatar, Jordan, and others in the region, was that ISIS and al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra had emerged as the preeminent rebel forces in Syria. The governments who took part reportedly committed to cut off ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, and support the FSA instead. But while

official support from Qatar and Saudi Arabia appears to have dried up, non-governmental military and financial support [may still be flowing](#) from these countries to Islamist groups.

Thus, to the extent that we worked with Bandar on a covert op to create an opposition force to overthrow Assad, we may well have had an indirect hand in its creation. That doesn't mean we wanted to create ISIS. It means we are led by the nose by the Saudis generally and were by Bandar specifically, in part because we are so reliant on them for our HUMINT in such matters. Particularly given Saudi support for Sunnis during our Iraq occupation, can you fault Iraqis for finding our tendency to get snookered by the Saudis suspect?

Moreover, our ongoing actions feed such suspicions. Consider the way the Administration is asking for Congressional sanction (at least in the form of funding) for an escalated engagement in the region, without first briefing Congress on the stupid things it has been doing covertly for the last 18 months?

That's one of the most striking details from last Wednesday's Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on the Mideast escalation. As I noted in my Salon piece last week, former Associate Counsel to the White House Andy Wright noted, and today Jack Goldsmith and Marty Lederman note, Tom Udall suggested before Congress funds overt training of Syrian opposition groups, maybe they should learn details about how the covert funding of Syrian opposition groups worked out.

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?

Kerry, who had been sitting right next to Hagel when the Defense Secretary confirmed this covert op a year ago, said he couldn't provide any details.

I know it's been written about, in the public domain that there is, quote, a covert operation. But I can't confirm, deny, whatever.

(At the end of the hearing he suggested he has been pushing to share more information, and that he might be able to arrange for the Chair and Ranking Member to be briefed.)

Shortly thereafter, SFRC Bob Menendez confirmed that his committee was being asked to legislate about a war with no details about the covert op that had laid the groundwork for – and created the urgency behind – that war.

To the core question that you raise, this is a problem that both the Administration, as well as the Senate leadership must be willing to deal with. Because when it comes to questions of being briefed on covert operations this committee does not have access to that information. Yet it is charged with a responsibility of determining whether or not the people of the United States should – through their Representatives – support an Authorization for the Use of Military Force. It is unfathomable to me to understand how this committee is going to get to those conclusions

without understanding all of the elements of military engagement both overtly and covertly. ... I'll call it, for lack of a better term, a procedural hurdle we're going to have to overcome if we want the information to make an informed judgment and get members on board.

How are we supposed to reassure Iraqis we're not still indirectly in bed with ISIS if the Administration won't even brief Congress about what's going on – and, more importantly, what did go on? As Tom Udall says, “everybody's well aware” we were working with Bandar for months to strengthen the opposition to Assad, but not even Congress is permitted to learn the details of it.

In their piece, Goldsmith and Lederman profess not to know why our previous training cannot now be acknowledged (and their larger piece explains there's no legal reason preventing it).

It's hard to imagine why U.S. involvement in the training of Syrian rebels must remain officially unacknowledged even now, in light of Secretary Hagel's public acknowledgment, and in light of the very public debate and congressional vote that just occurred on this very subject: After all, going forward there won't be any secret that the U.S. is training the rebels; so why must the current operation remain unacknowledged?

But there probably is a very good reason why the Administration won't acknowledge the operation: in part, because we still want to use at least some of the terrorist groups our allies funded to combat Assad. And in even larger part, because acknowledging the actions implemented by Bandar might lead to exposure of our complicity in some pretty appalling things.

So the Obama Administration may once again – as it did with the Awlaki drone killing – be using the fiction of covert status to avoid having to fully reveal all the sordid details of an indefensible operation.

But in this case, our refusal to come clean – and, frankly, to right our dysfunctional relationship with the Saudis – will continue to undermine our efforts to combat ISIS. It may be easy for NYT to mock Moqtada al-Sadr’s “conspiracy theories.” But dismissing them in the NYT is going to do nothing for the very justifiable belief among many in the Middle East that our secret past actions directly conflict with our stated words.