

American Arms in Syria: Will the good terrorists please stand up

By Yuram Abdullah Weiler

2013-07-31

“The US doesn’t plan to send weapons to the horrid rebels, mark you – not to the al-Qa’ida-inspired al-Nusra Front whose chaps film themselves eating Alawites for YouTube videos, barbecue the heads of captured Syrian troops and murder 14-year-old schoolboys for blasphemy. Only to the nice rebels, the Free Syrian Army deserters who are battling the forces of Assad darkness in the interests of freedom, liberty, women’s rights and democracy.” - Robert Fisk¹

Once again, the United States is arming extremists with rifles and anti-tank weapons in hopes of replacing an allegedly anti-American dictatorial despot with a pliable, pro-western democratic regime that would provide “liberty and justice for all,” to borrow a phrase from the American pledge of allegiance,² or at least one that is in “transition toward democracy,” as is said about most U.S. “partners” in the Middle East. White house spokesman Jay Carney is adamant that “there is no way out of this that doesn’t include a transition to a post-Assad Syria.”³ Yet in view of the historical record, how is it possible that American leaders could believe such a scheme would succeed? Perhaps it is simply as Distinguished Professor of History, Ervand Abrahamian writes, “One should never underestimate the role of stupidity in history.”⁴

Syria is awash with diverse insurgent groups all competing for arms and money, and among some of them, sharp conflict exists threatening a civil war within a civil war. Such is the case between the western-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the notorious al-Qa’ida affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, which reportedly has shot and killed senior FSA commander Kamal Hamami, threatened to kill all members of the FSA Supreme Military Council, kidnapped others for ransom, and even sent suicide bombers into FSA command posts. “This is a disaster for us, a disaster for the revolution,” lamented one female activist while conceding that the popularity of the Salafi groups has increased because of corruption within the FSA. Others say the revolution has itself become corrupt and has slid into a tyranny of “crime, kidnapping, and gangsterism.”⁵

Besides Jabhat al-Nusra, there are numerous other Salafist groups active there, eleven of which comprise the so-called “moderate” Syrian Islamic Front (SIF),⁶ So despite the western powers’ claim to back only “soft-Islamic” foreign insurgents, given the competition, conflict and corruption among factions, there is no way to guarantee into whose hands their donated weapons will fall. Moreover, arms are often used as currency: a “good” rebel faction in need of fuel or medical supplies may sell its U.S.-supplied arms to a “bad” faction, or may be taken over by a stronger “bad” group and forced to relinquish its weapons. Another possibility is that a “good” group, or individuals within it, may switch their affiliation and wind up under the command of a “bad” group. Hence, it borders on stupidity to imagine that there could be a foolproof way to even know, much less control, who would ultimately be the users of U.S.-donated weaponry.

Nevertheless, the hawkish U.S. Republican senator from Arizona, John McCain, insists, “We can identify who these [good] people are. We can help the right people.”⁷ Expressing concern over the potential to spill “precious” American blood and acknowledging the end user uncertainty, Republican Rep. Rich Nugent of Florida candidly remarked, “We want to make sure that we don’t put our sons or daughters in any jeopardy particularly as it relates to arming those that we

have no idea who they are.”⁸ Representative Adam Schiff, a Democrat from California on the House Intelligence Committee, appears even less optimistic over who could wind up with American armaments. Disagreeing with the idea of arming the foreign-backed insurgents, he correctly notes, “I think we also have to expect that some of the weapons we provide are going to get into the hands of those who would use them against us.”⁹

Exactly how McCain will identify the “good” insurgents from the “bad” ones remains unclear. Perhaps he will use the length of the men’s beards as his criterion, but even this is subject to deception. One experienced ex-Libyan rebel commander, after suggesting to a group of bewildered bearded insurgents that they shave, explained, “To the Americans, a beard means Islamist and terrorist.”¹⁰ In any event, even if McCain has discovered some infallible way of identifying the “good guys” and assuring that they will be the initial recipient of the firearms, can he guarantee that the weapons will remain there?

Expounding on this fatal flaw in the McCain arms control process, Journalist Robert Fisk writes: “The nice rebels could be given anti-aircraft missiles (shoulder-fired variety preferred) to use against Assad’s helicopters and Migs. Thank you – ‘shukran’ – the nice rebels will say. But once over the border, the horrid rebel Nusra chaps will make an offer the nice rebels can’t refuse: either many thousands of dollars or a threat to seize the munitions (head-chopping optional), or a mixture of both. ... In the Lebanese civil war, not a single gun I ever saw was actually donated to the men who carried them.”¹¹

Of course, the United States has taken this approach before many times with disastrous undesired consequences. One example is Afghanistan, where the U.S. armed extremists recruited from Saudi Arabia in an effort to install a “democratic,” western-friendly regime in Kabul and prevent the Soviet Union from moving closer to accessing a warm water port on the Arabian Sea. However after over thirty years of continuous carnage, and the sea of arms created thereby that still manages to flow to every U.S.-sponsored conflict as needed, Afghanistan is a far cry from the original stated goal of a peaceful democratic state. And one must not forget the “blowback” of attacks carried out by the former “freedom fighters” on the New York World Trade Center in 1993, Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996, American Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, the U.S.S. Cole in 2000,¹² and the New York World Trade Center again and the Pentagon in 2001.

Succinctly illustrating the long term hazards of arming extremists, Fisk writes: “Back in the Eighties, the US handed out missiles and other goodies to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, one of the super-freedom fighters trying to kill lots of Russians in Afghanistan. But Mr. Hekmatyar then became a super-terrorist and decided to kill lots of post-2001 American occupiers of his country – using the same weapons donated to him by those grand arms dealers Messrs. Carter and Reagan Inc.”¹³

The arming of rebels in Libya has not worked out well for the west, either, since the country has now become a prime source of illicit arms that are finding their way into other conflicts in North Africa and the Middle East. After the fall of Colonel Qadhafi, rebels seized government weapons caches, much of which still remains in the hands of militias. These arms, which include man-portable air defense systems, small arms, ammunition, explosives and mines, are being

exported to various non-state actors in Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Mali in Africa, and Syria in the Levant, fueling conflicts throughout the entire region.¹⁴

One must also ask, why is the U.S. targeting Syria? After all, not only was Syria a westernized country with a secular government, but partnered with the CIA after the 9/11 attacks to provide much valuable intelligence information to Washington for the latter's "war on terror." Historically, President Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, was a member of George H.W. Bush's coalition in the first Persian Gulf War in 1991. Former U.S. President Clinton even visited Hafez al-Assad in Damascus in 1994, the first visit by a U.S. president in twenty years, in an effort to stimulate peace talks between Syria and the Zionist regime. Syria has pursued peace negotiations with Israel since the early 1990s and almost finalized an agreement in 2000. However since that time, all Zionist leaders have taken a hardline approach to relations with the Syrian government.¹⁵

Syria reportedly even foiled an al-Qa'ida plot to fly an explosive-filled plane into the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet headquarters building in Bahrain. So what went wrong? Initially, Washington refused to reassess the tone of its relationship with Damascus, which remained on the former's list of state sponsors of terrorism despite no evidence of involvement in any such act since 1986. Then Bush Junior demanded that President al-Assad side with the U.S. in his illegal preemptive war on Iraq and, taking the higher moral ground, the Syrian leader said no.¹⁶

Another, perhaps overriding reason for targeting Syria now is the Zionist entity's desire for revenge after the humiliating defeat in 2006 by Hezbollah, which reportedly receives support from President al-Assad. In addition, Tel Aviv sees Damascus as a strong ally of Tehran, but does not possess sufficient military might to take on both countries without U.S. aid. Therefore, luring Washington into providing weapons to foreign-backed insurgents helps advance the Zionist agenda by weakening an Iranian ally, and allowing Israel to hold on illegally-seized Syrian water resources of the Golan Heights.¹⁷ However, by marching lockstep into the fray at Israel's beckoning, the U.S. is clearly not acting in its own best interests, as former state department official Aaron Miller observed, "There is a danger in a policy in which there is no daylight whatsoever between the government of 'Israel' and the government of the United States."¹⁸ Yet, Tel Aviv seems to be acting with stupidity as well, for if the Assad government does fall to foreign-backed Salafi insurgents, what will prevent these extremists from turning their western-furnished weapons on the Zionist entity next?¹⁹

In analyzing the rationality, or dare one say sanity, of the American policymakers who, once again are treading on this perilous path, one is forced to ask a difficult and embarrassing question: Do the U.S. leaders have a firm grasp on what they are doing, or are their actions perhaps a result of a lack of – realizing the potential ambiguity in using the word – intelligence? Over the years, U.S. analysts have a stunning record of failing to predict pivotal global events: the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the demise of the Soviet Union, and the so-called Arab Spring just to mention a few. On the collapse of the Soviet Union, the late Professor Chalmers Johnson wrote, "The American leadership did not have either the information or the imagination to grasp what was happening."²⁰ Perhaps this is also the case in Syria, or perhaps it is simply war-obsessed leaders driven by the Pentagon and the CIA, intent on spreading violence and strife.

The arming of foreign-backed extremists in Syria is just one of many signs that the United States government is completely out of control. “A revolution would be required to bring the Pentagon back under democratic control, or to abolish the CIA,”²¹ wrote Chalmers Johnson. According to the United States own Declaration of Independence, whenever a government fails to protect “unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” then “it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it.”²² In view of the persistent failure by the United States to honor these rights for its own citizens, the time has arrived for them to rise up and abolish this belligerent, parasitic and oppressive government.

Endnotes

¹ Robert Fisk, “As the US wants to arm 'nice Syrian rebels' we must remind ourselves that weapons are not just guns. They are about money,” *The Independent*, June 14, 2013, accessed July 30, 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/as-the-us-wants-to-arm-nice-syrian-rebels-we-must-remind-ourselves-that-weapons-are-not-just-guns-they-are-about-money-8659784.html>.

² “I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, **with liberty and justice for all.**” (Emphasis added).

³ Jay Carney, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 7/23/2013,” Office of the Press Secretary, White House, July 23, 2013, accessed July 30, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/23/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-7232013>.

⁴ Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 158.

⁵ Paul Wood, “Syrian rebel fighters' civil war within a civil war,” *BBC News*, July 13, 2013, accessed July 31, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23285869>.

⁶ Aron Lund, “Syria’s Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front,” *UI Occasional Papers*, Swedish Institute of International Affairs 17 (2013), 3, accessed July 30, 2013, <http://www.ui.se/eng/upl/files/86861.pdf>.

⁷ Patricia Zengerle, “Senator John McCain confident of identifying 'good guys' in Syria,” *Reuters*, May 29, 2013, accessed July 30, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/30/us-syria-crisis-mccain-idUSBRE94T02W20130530>.

⁸ Brianna Kielar, Jessica Yellin and Tom Cohen, “Obama to move forward with plan to arm Syrian rebels,” *CNN*, July 24, 2013, accessed July 30, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/07/23/politics/us-syrian-rebels>.

⁹ Tabassum Zakaria and Susan Cornwell, “Exclusive: U.S. congressional hurdles lifted on arming Syrian rebels,” *Reuters*, July 23, 2013, accessed July 30, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/23/us-usa-syria-arms-idUSBRE96L0W520130723>.

¹⁰ Rania Abouzeid, “Arming Syria’s Rebellion: How Libyan Weapons and Know-How Reach Anti-Assad Fighters,” *Time*, May 29, 2013, accessed July 31, 2013, <http://world.time.com/2013/05/29/libyans-arming-syrian-rebels/2/>.

¹¹ Robert Fisk, *ibid.*

¹² Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 139.

¹³ Robert Fisk, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Michelle Nichols, “Libya arms fueling conflicts in Syria, Mali and beyond: U.N. experts,” *Reuters*, April 9, 2013, accessed July 31, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/09/us-libya-arms-un-idUSBRE93814Y20130409>.

¹⁵ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 266.

¹⁶ Seymour Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 334-337.

¹⁷ “The Syrian Golan Heights Under The Israeli Occupation,” *Jawlan website*, accessed July 30, 2013, <http://www.jawlan.org/english/golanheights.htm>.

¹⁸ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *ibid.*, 319.

¹⁹ Rania Abouzeid, *ibid.*

²⁰ Chalmers Johnson, *ibid.*, 19.

²¹ Chalmers Johnson, *ibid.*, 12.

²² “The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription,” U.S. Government Archives, accessed July 30, 2013, http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html.