

Articles to Support Question 1

How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html>

Extremist clerics and secretive associations funded by Saudis and others have transformed a once-tolerant Muslim society into a font of extremism.

By CARLOTTA GALL

MAY 21, 2016, New York Times

PRISTINA, Kosovo — Every Friday, just yards from a statue of Bill Clinton with arm aloft in a cheery wave, hundreds of young bearded men make a show of kneeling to pray on the sidewalk outside an improvised mosque in a former furniture store.

The mosque is one of scores built here with Saudi government money and blamed for spreading Wahhabism — the conservative ideology dominant in [Saudi Arabia](#) — in the 17 years since an American-led intervention wrested tiny [Kosovo](#) from Serbian oppression.

Since then — much of that time under the watch of American officials — Saudi money and influence have transformed this once-tolerant Muslim society at the hem of Europe into a font of Islamic extremism and a pipeline for jihadists.

Kosovo now finds itself, like the rest of Europe, fending off the threat of radical Islam. Over the last two years, the police have identified 314 Kosovars — including two suicide bombers, 44 women and 28 children — who have gone abroad to join the Islamic State, the highest number per capita in Europe.

They were radicalized and recruited, Kosovo investigators say, by a corps of extremist clerics and secretive associations funded by Saudi Arabia and other conservative Arab gulf states using an obscure, labyrinthine network of donations from charities, private individuals and government ministries.

“They promoted political Islam,” said Fatos Makolli, the director of Kosovo’s counterterrorism police. “They spent a lot of money to promote it through different programs mainly with young, vulnerable people, and they brought in a lot of Wahhabi and Salafi literature. They brought these people closer to radical political Islam, which resulted in their radicalization.”

After two years of investigations, the police have charged 67 people, arrested 14 imams and shut down 19 Muslim organizations for acting against the Constitution, inciting hatred and recruiting for terrorism. The most recent sentences, which included a 10-year prison term, were handed down on Friday.

It is a stunning turnabout for a land of 1.8 million people that not long ago was among the most pro-American Muslim societies in the world. Americans were welcomed as liberators after leading months of NATO bombing in 1999 that spawned an independent Kosovo.



American bombing of Serbian positions in Kosovo in 1999 during the air campaign by NATO. Credit Jerome Delay/Associated Press

After the war, United Nations officials administered the territory and American forces helped keep the peace. The Saudis arrived, too, bringing millions of euros in aid to a poor and war-ravaged land. But where the Americans saw a chance to create a new democracy, the Saudis saw a new land to spread Wahhabism.

“There is no evidence that any organization gave money directly to people to go to Syria,” Mr. Makolli said. “The issue is they supported thinkers who promote violence and jihad in the name of protecting Islam.”

Kosovo now has over 800 mosques, 240 of them built since the war and blamed for helping indoctrinate a new generation in Wahhabism. They are part of what moderate imams and officials here describe as a deliberate, long-term strategy by Saudi Arabia to reshape Islam in its image, not only in Kosovo but around the world.

Saudi diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks in 2015 reveal a system of funding for mosques, Islamic centers and Saudi-trained clerics that spans Asia, Africa and Europe. In New Delhi alone, 140 Muslim preachers are listed as on the Saudi Consulate’s payroll.

All around Kosovo, families are grappling with the aftermath of years of proselytizing by Saudi-trained preachers. Some daughters refuse to shake hands with or talk to male relatives. Some sons have gone off to jihad. Religious vigilantes have threatened — or committed — violence against academics, journalists and politicians.

The Balkans, Europe’s historical fault line, have yet to heal from the ethnic wars of the 1990s. But they are now infected with a new intolerance, moderate imams and officials in the region warn. How Kosovo and the very nature of its society was fundamentally recast is a story of a decades-long global ambition by Saudi Arabia to spread its hard-line version of Islam — heavily funded and systematically applied, including with threats and intimidation by followers.



Idriz Bilalli, an imam in Podujevo, has sought to curb extremists and has received death threats. Credit Andrew Testa for The New York Times

The Missionaries Arrive

After the war ended in 1999, Idriz Bilalli, the imam of the central mosque in Podujevo, welcomed any help he could get.

Podujevo, home to about 90,000 people in northeast Kosovo, was a reasonably prosperous town with high schools and small businesses in an area hugged by farmland and forests. It was known for its strong Muslim tradition even in a land where people long wore their religion lightly.

After decades of Communist rule when Kosovo was part of Yugoslavia, men and women mingle freely, schools are coeducational, and girls rarely wear the veil. Still, Serbian paramilitary forces burned down 218 mosques as part of their war against Kosovo's ethnic Albanians, who are 95 percent Muslim. Mr. Bilalli needed help to rebuild.

When two imams in their 30s, Fadil Musliu and Fadil Sogojeva, who were studying for master's degrees in Saudi Arabia, showed up after the war with money to organize summer religion courses, Mr. Bilalli agreed to help.

The imams were just two of some 200 Kosovars who took advantage of scholarships after the war to study Islam in Saudi Arabia. Many, like them, returned with missionary zeal. Soon, under Mr. Musliu's tutelage, pupils started adopting a rigid manner of prayer, foreign to the moderate Islamic traditions of this part of Europe. Mr. Bilalli recognized the influence, and he grew concerned.

"This is Wahhabism coming into our society," Mr. Bilalli, 52, said in a recent interview.

Mr. Bilalli trained at the University of Medina in Saudi Arabia in the late 1980s, and as a student he had been warned by a Kosovar professor to guard against the cultural differences of Wahhabism. He understood there was a campaign of proselytizing, pushed by the Saudis.

"The first thing the Wahhabis do is to take members of our congregation, who understand Islam in the traditional Kosovo way that we had for generations, and try to draw them away from this

understanding,” he said. “Once they get them away from the traditional congregation, then they start bombarding them with radical thoughts and ideas.”

“The main goal of their activity is to create conflict between people,” he said. “This first creates division, and then hatred, and then it can come to what happened in Arab countries, where war starts because of these conflicting ideas.”

From the outset, the newly arriving clerics sought to overtake the Islamic Community of Kosovo, an organization that for generations has been the custodian of the tolerant form of Islam that was practiced in the region, townspeople and officials say.

Muslims in Kosovo, which was a part of the Ottoman Empire for 500 years, follow the Hanafi school of Islam, traditionally a liberal version that is accepting of other religions.

But all around the country, a new breed of radical preachers was setting up in neighborhood mosques, often newly built with Saudi money.

In some cases, centuries-old buildings were bulldozed, including a historic library in Gjakova and several 400-year-old mosques, as well as shrines, graveyards and Dervish monasteries, all considered idolatrous in Wahhabi teaching.

From their bases, the Saudi-trained imams propagated Wahhabism’s tenets: the supremacy of [Sharia law](#) as well as ideas of violent jihad and takfirism, which authorizes the killing of Muslims considered heretics for not following its interpretation of Islam.

The Saudi-sponsored charities often paid salaries and overhead costs, and financed courses in religion, as well as English and computer classes, moderate imams and investigators explained.

But the charitable assistance often had conditions attached. Families were given monthly stipends on the condition that they attended sermons in the mosque and that women and girls wore the veil, human rights activists said.

“People were so needy, there was no one who did not join,” recalled Ajnishahe Halimi, a politician who campaigned to have a radical Albanian imam expelled after families complained of abuse.

Threats Intensify

Within a few years of the war’s end, the older generation of traditional clerics began to encounter aggression from young Wahhabis.

Paradoxically, some of the most serious tensions built in Gjilan, an eastern Kosovo town of about 90,000, where up to 7,000 American troops were stationed as part of Kosovo’s United Nations-run peacekeeping force at Camp Bondsteel.

“They came in the name of aid,” one moderate imam in Gjilan, Enver Rexhepi, said of the Arab charities. “But they came with a background of different intentions, and that’s where the Islamic religion started splitting here.”

One day in 2004, he recalled, he was threatened by one of the most aggressive young Wahhabis, Zekirja Qazimi, a former madrasa student then in his early 20s.

Inside his mosque, Mr. Rexhepi had long displayed an Albanian flag. Emblazoned with a double-headed eagle, it was a popular symbol of Kosovo's liberation struggle.

But strict Muslim fundamentalists consider the depiction of any living being as idolatrous. Mr. Qazimi tore the flag down. Mr. Rexhepi put it back.

"It will not go long like this," Mr. Qazimi told him angrily, Mr. Rexhepi recounted.

Within days, Mr. Rexhepi was abducted and savagely beaten by masked men in woods above Gjilan. He later accused Mr. Qazimi of having been behind the attack, but police investigations went nowhere.

Ten years later, in 2014, after two young Kosovars blew themselves up in suicide bombings in Iraq and Turkey, investigators began an extensive investigation into the sources of radicalism. Mr. Qazimi was arrested hiding in the same woods. On Friday, a court sentenced him to 10 years in prison after he faced charges of inciting hatred and recruiting for a terrorist organization.

Before Mr. Qazimi was arrested, his influence was profound, under what investigators now say was the sway of Egyptian-based extremists and the patronage of Saudi and other gulf Arab sponsors. By the mid-2000s, Saudi money and Saudi-trained clerics were already exerting influence over the Islamic Community of Kosovo. The leadership quietly condoned the drift toward conservatism, critics of the organization say.

Mr. Qazimi was appointed first to a village mosque, and then to El-Kuddus mosque on the edge of Gjilan. Few could counter him, not even Mustafa Bajrami, his former teacher, who was elected head of the Islamic Community of Gjilan in 2012.

Mr. Bajrami comes from a prominent religious family — his father was the first chief mufti of Yugoslavia during the Communist period. He holds a doctorate in Islamic studies. Yet he remembers pupils began rebelling against him whenever he spoke against Wahhabism.

He soon realized that the students were being taught beliefs that differed from the traditional moderate curriculum by several radical imams in lectures after hours. He banned the use of mosques after official prayer times.

Hostility only grew. He would notice a dismissive gesture in the congregation during his sermons, or someone would curse his wife, or mutter "apostate" or "infidel" as he passed.

In the village, Mr. Qazimi's influence eventually became so disruptive that residents demanded his removal after he forbade girls and boys to shake hands. But in Gjilan he continued to draw dozens of young people to his after-hours classes.

"They were moving 100 percent according to lessons they were taking from Zekirja Qazimi," Mr. Bajrami said in an interview. "One hundred percent, in an ideological way."

Extremism Spreads

Over time, the Saudi-trained imams expanded their work.

By 2004, Mr. Musliu, one of the master's degree students from Podujevo who studied in Saudi Arabia, had graduated and was imam of a mosque in the capital, Pristina.

In Podujevo, he set up a local charitable organization called Devotshmeria, or Devotion, which taught religion classes and offered social programs for women, orphans and the poor. It was funded by Al Waqf al Islami, a Saudi organization that was one of the 19 eventually closed by investigators.

Secrets of the Kingdom

Articles in this [series](#) examine the society, politics, religion and global influence of Saudi Arabia, one of the world's most secretive countries.

Mr. Musliu put a cousin, Jetmir Rrahmani, in charge.

“Then I knew something was starting that would not bring any good,” said Mr. Bilalli, the moderate cleric who had started out teaching with him. In 2004, they had a core of 20 Wahhabis.

“That was only the beginning,” Mr. Bilalli said. “They started multiplying.”

Mr. Bilalli began a vigorous campaign against the spread of unauthorized mosques and Wahhabi teaching. In 2008, he was elected head of the Islamic Community of Podujevo and instituted religion classes for women, in an effort to undercut Devotshmeria.

As he sought to curb the extremists, Mr. Bilalli received death threats, including a note left in the mosque's alms box. An anonymous telephone caller vowed to make him and his family disappear, he said.

“Anyone who opposes them, they see as an enemy,” Mr. Bilalli said.

He appealed to the leadership of the Islamic Community of Kosovo. But by then it was heavily influenced by Arab gulf sponsors, he said, and he received little support.

When Mr. Bilalli formed a union of fellow moderates, the Islamic Community of Kosovo removed him from his post. His successor, Bekim Jashari, equally concerned by the Saudi influence, nevertheless kept up the fight.

“I spent 10 years in Arab countries and specialized in sectarianism within Islam,” Mr. Jashari said. “It's very important to stop Arab sectarianism from being introduced to Kosovo.”

Mr. Jashari had a couple of brief successes. He blocked the Saudi-trained imam Mr. Sogojeva from opening a new mosque, and stopped a payment of 20,000 euros, about \$22,400, intended for it from the Saudi charity Al Waqf al Islami.

He also began a website, Speak Now, to counter Wahhabi teaching. But he remains so concerned about Wahhabi preachers that he never lets his 19-year-old son attend prayers on his own.

The radical imams Mr. Musliu and Mr. Sogojeva still preach in Pristina, where for prayers they draw crowds of young men who glare at foreign reporters.

Mr. Sogojeva dresses in a traditional robe and banded cleric's hat, but his newly built mosque is an incongruous modern multistory building. He admonished his congregation with a rapid-fire list of dos and don'ts in a recent Friday sermon.

Neither imam seems to lack funds.

In an interview, Mr. Musliu insisted that he was financed by local donations, but confirmed that he had received Saudi funding for his early religion courses.

The instruction, he said, is not out of line with Kosovo's traditions. The increase in religiosity among young people was natural after Kosovo gained its freedom, he said.

"Those who are not believers and do not read enough, they feel a bit shocked," he said. "But we coordinated with other imams, and everything was in line with Islam."

A Tilt Toward Terrorism

The influence of the radical clerics reached its apex with the war in Syria, as they extolled the virtues of jihad and used speeches and radio and television talks shows to urge young people to go there.

Mr. Qazimi, who was given the 10-year prison sentence, even organized a summer camp for his young followers.

"It is obligated for every Muslim to participate in jihad," he told them in [one videotaped talk](#). "The Prophet Muhammad says that if someone has a chance to take part in jihad and doesn't, he will die with great sins."

"The blood of infidels is the best drink for us Muslims," he said in another recording.

Among his recruits, investigators say, were three former civilian employees of American contracting companies at Camp Bondsteel, where American troops are stationed. They included Lavdrim Muhaxheri, an Islamic State leader who was filmed executing a man in Syria with a rocket-propelled grenade.

After the suicide bombings, the authorities opened a broad investigation and found that the Saudi charity Al Waqf al Islami had been supporting associations set up by preachers like Mr. Qazimi in almost every regional town.

Al Waqf al Islami was established in the Balkans in 1989. Most of its financing came from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain, Kosovo investigators said in recent interviews. Unexplained gaps in its ledgers deepened suspicions that the group was surreptitiously funding clerics who were radicalizing young people, they said.

Investigators from Kosovo's Financial Intelligence Unit found that Al Waqf al Islami, which had an office in central Pristina and a staff of 12, ran through €10 million from 2000 through 2012. Yet they found little paperwork to explain much of the spending.

More than €1 million went to mosque building. But one and a half times that amount was disbursed in unspecified cash withdrawals, which may have also gone to enriching its staff, the investigators said. Only 7 percent of the budget was shown to have gone to caring for orphans, the charity's stated mission. By the summer of 2014, the Kosovo police shut down Al Waqf al Islami, along with 12 other Islamic charities, and arrested 40 people.

The charity's head offices, in Saudi Arabia and the Netherlands, have since changed their name to Al Waqf, apparently separating themselves from the Balkans operation.

Asked about the accusations in a telephone interview, Nasr el Damanhoury, the director of Al Waqf in the Netherlands, said he had no direct knowledge of his group's operations in Kosovo or the Balkans. The charity has ceased all work outside the Netherlands since he took over in 2013, he said. His predecessor had returned to Morocco and could not be reached, and Saudi board members would not comment, he said.

"Our organization has never supported extremism," Mr. Damanhoury said. "I have known it since 1989. I joined them three years ago. They have always been a mild group."



Kosovars celebrating the independence of Kosovo from Serbia in 2008. Credit Bela Szandelszky/Associated Press

Unheeded Warnings

Why the Kosovar authorities — and American and United Nations overseers — did not act sooner to forestall the spread of extremism is a question being intensely debated.

As early as 2004, the prime minister at the time, Bajram Rexhepi, tried to introduce a law to ban extremist sects. But, he said in a recent interview at his home in northern Kosovo, European officials told him that it would violate freedom of religion.

"It was not in their interest, they did not want to irritate some Islamic countries," Mr. Rexhepi said. "They simply did not do anything."

Not everyone was unaware of the dangers, however.

At a meeting in 2003, Richard C. Holbrooke, once the United States special envoy to the Balkans, warned Kosovar leaders not to work with the Saudi Joint Relief Committee for Kosovo, an umbrella organization of Saudi charities whose name still appears on many of the mosques built since the war, along with that of the former Saudi interior minister, Prince Naif bin Abdul-Aziz.

A year later, it was among several Saudi organizations that were shut down in Kosovo when it came under suspicion as a front for Al Qaeda. Another was Al-Haramain, which in 2004 was designated by the United States Treasury Department as having links to terrorism.

Yet even as some organizations were shut down, others kept working. Staff and equipment from Al-Haramain shifted to Al Waqf al Islami, moderate imams familiar with their activities said. In recent years, Saudi Arabia appears to have reduced its aid to Kosovo. Kosovo Central Bank figures show grants from Saudi Arabia averaging €100,000 a year for the past five years.

It is now money from Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates — which each average approximately €1 million a year — that propagates the same hard-line version of Islam. The payments come from foundations or individuals, or sometimes from the Ministry of Zakat (Almsgiving) from the various governments, Kosovo's investigators say.

But payments are often diverted through a second country to obscure their origin and destination, they said. One transfer of nearly €500,000 from a Saudi individual was frozen in 2014 since it was intended for a Kosovo teenager, according to the investigators and a [State Department report](#).

Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations were still raising millions from “deep-pocket donors and charitable organizations” based in the gulf, the Treasury under secretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, David S. Cohen, said in a [speech in 2014 at the Center for a New American Security](#). While Saudi Arabia has made progress in stamping out funding for Al Qaeda, sympathetic donors in the kingdom were still funding other terrorist groups, he said.

Today the Islamic Community of Kosovo has been so influenced by the largess of Arab donors that it has seeded prominent positions with radical clerics, its critics say.

Ahmet Sadriu, a spokesman for Islamic Community of Kosovo, said the group held to Kosovo's traditionally tolerant version of Islam. But calls are growing to overhaul an organization now seen as having been corrupted by outside forces and money.

Kosovo's interior minister, Skender Hyseni, said he had recently reprimanded some of the senior religious officials.

“I told them they were doing a great disservice to their country,” he said in an interview. “Kosovo is by definition, by Constitution, a secular society. There has always been historically an unspoken interreligious tolerance among Albanians here, and we want to make sure that we keep it that way.”

Families Divided

For some in Kosovo, it may already be too late.

Families have been torn apart. Some of Kosovo's best and brightest have been caught up in the lure of jihad.

One of Kosovo's top political science graduates, Albert Berisha, said he left in 2013 to help the Syrian people in the uprising against the government of President Bashar al-Assad. He abandoned his attempt after only two weeks — and he says he never joined the Islamic State — but has been sentenced to three and a half years in prison, pending appeal.

Ismet Sakiqi, an official in the prime minister's office and a veteran of the liberation struggle, was shaken to find his 22-year-old son, Visar, a law student, arrested on his way through Turkey to Syria with his fiancée. He now visits his son in the same Kosovo prison where he was detained under Serbian rule.

And in the hamlet of Busavate, in the wooded hills of eastern Kosovo, a widower, Shemsi Maliqi, struggles to explain how his family has been divided. One of his sons, Alejhim, 27, has taken his family to join the Islamic State in Syria.

It remains unclear how Alejhim became radicalized. He followed his grandfather, training as an imam in Gjilan, and served in the village mosque for six years. Then, two years ago, he asked his father to help him travel to Egypt to study.

Mr. Maliqi still clings to the hope that his son is studying in Egypt rather than fighting in Syria. But Kosovo's counterterrorism police recently put out an international arrest warrant for Alejhim. "Better that he comes back dead than alive," Mr. Maliqi, a poor farmer, said. "I sent him to school, not to war. I sold my cow for him."

Alejhim had married a woman from the nearby village of Vrbice who was so conservative that she was veiled up to her eyes and refused to shake hands with her brother-in-law.

The wife's mother angrily refused to be interviewed. Her daughter did what was expected and followed her husband to Syria, she said.

Secretly, Alejhim drew three others — his sister; his best friend, who married his sister; and his wife's sister — to follow him to Syria, too. The others have since returned, but remain radical and estranged from the family.

Alejhim's uncle, Fehmi Maliqi, like the rest of the family, is dismayed. "It's a catastrophe," he said.

Is Saudi-funded mosque in Sarajevo threat to Bosnia's moderate Muslims?

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/is-saudi-funded-mosque-in-sarajevo-threat-to-bosnias-moderate-muslims/>

By Malcolm Brabant, MAY 16, 2016, PBS Newshour

HARI SREENIVASAN: But, first, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the country's reputedly moderate ruling Islamic community is cracking down on dozens of radical mosques.

The head of that community is on guard after his life was threatened by extremists. The radical mosques will be shut down unless they come under the council's control. But there are doubts whether these small, mainly rural mosques pose the greatest threat in terms of radicalization.

A former Bosnian intelligence officer has told the "NewsHour" that Western allies should be more concerned about the risk from a huge Saudi-sponsored mosque in the capital, Sarajevo.

Special correspondent Malcolm Brabant reports.

MALCOLM BRABANT: I'm in Central Bosnia, about 100 miles from the capital, Sarajevo.

I'm heading up to a remote mountain village called Osve, which is a place where, supposedly, there are some supporters of the so-called Islamic State. There have been people who've gone from this village to fight in Syria. Some have reportedly been killed. And we're going to meet somebody who used to play rock 'n' roll, but is now labeled by the head of the Islamic community in Bosnia as someone who is a terrorist.

Izet Hadzic used to be lead guitarist in a band called Black Lady. After fighting in the Bosnian War, he abandoned what he thought was a decadent lifestyle and sought peace in religion. He leads one of these so-called radical mosques. While he's in dispute with the Islamic establishment, he insists he's no terrorist.

IZET HADZIC, Mosque Leader (through interpreter): Where does it come from to call us terrorists? It is because that people who look like us, have these beards, are doing such acts in the world, specifically ISIS and this cretin Baghdadi.

MALCOLM BRABANT: Two doors away from Hadzic's small holding is the father of a young man killed in Syria. Next door is a family Hadzic regards as extreme. Bosnian intelligence officers are frequent visitors.

Hadzic unequivocally condemns Islamic State.

IZET HADZIC (through interpreter): You can't call this jihad. To take a gun while someone is walking down the street with his family and begin to shoot? Can you imagine soldier doing this? These people are equal to cowards.

MALCOLM BRABANT: We had a polite, but frosty reception in Bocinje, a nearby village that was a stronghold of foreign mujahideen during the Bosnian War. We hoped to interview a man who returned from Syria in 2014, but he didn't want to be filmed because of an impending court case. His name is Ibrahim Delic.

Dozens of other Bosnians now in Syria are said to want to return because they are horrified by ISIS atrocities. Crippled and radicalized during the Bosnian War, Delic recently talked to the Balkan

Investigative Reporting Network. Significantly, he criticized the Free Syrian Army, who are enemies of ISIS.

IBRAHIM DELIC, Syrian Returnee (through interpreter): That Free Syrian Army, that is one scum army. Sometimes, they picked a girl, took her, raped a girl, gave her back home, or they killed her.

MALCOLM BRABANT: The flag in this video shot in Syria is not that of Islamic State. Delic is telling a crowd to fight for Islam. He insists he didn't commit any crimes.

IBRAHIM DELIC (through interpreter): When I saw that, at the checkpoints, they started to stop foreigners who came to fight, when I saw Free Syrian Army soldiers taking guns away from them and killing them for the gun or for the little money they had, these foreign guys started to attack back. And at that moment, I knew that a big conflict among them is going to happen. I asked some people to help get me back across the border.

MALCOLM BRABANT: This poor rural village contains several Serb families, once the sworn enemies of Islamists. But subsistence farmer Milan Petrovic insists he's happy to live here.

MILAN PETROVIC, Farmer (through interpreter): To tell you the truth, they are our good neighbors. We have no problems. They greet us, we greet them. We don't have any problems.

MALCOLM BRABANT: To get an assessment of the risk posed by radical Islamists in Bosnia, we visited a murder scene, in truth, a mocked-up murder scene used for training students at the Department of Criminology at Sarajevo University.

Professor Goran Kovacevic, a Serb, is an expert on Islamic radicals and spent seven years as an agent with Bosnian intelligence.

GORAN KOVACEVIC, University of Sarajevo: They are not radicals like they are presented in the media. For example, you have in the United States Amish groups behaving in a similar manner.

MALCOLM BRABANT: The big difference is that the Amish are avowed pacifists. The radicals are total opposites, according to officials of Bosnia's Islamic community.

The organization claims it is trying to preserve moderate Koranic principles practiced in Bosnia since the country was conquered by the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century.

International relations director Razim Colic says hard-line mosques are the product of extreme foreign influence.

RAZIM COLIC, Foreign Affairs Director, Islamic Community: As the passage of time, these people got radicalized. A number of them, they have been in contact with some people outside Bosnia-Herzegovina, because this is not from Bosnia. It has been imported from somewhere else.

MALCOLM BRABANT: Since issuing an edict effectively outlawing the radical mosques, Bosnia's Muslim spiritual leader, Husein Kavazovic, seen here at an inauguration ceremony, has required additional security.

RAZIM COLIC: They told that they are — when they come here, they will slaughter him in the middle of Sarajevo. So, we are probably the first target, because they take us as infidels.

MALCOLM BRABANT: But concerns have been raised about the huge Saudi-funded King Fahd Mosque, one of several that have changed not just Sarajevo's skyline, but also allegedly the way of thinking.

Yet, nominally, it's controlled by the Bosnian Islamic community.

GORAN KOVACEVIC: People should be worried about this mosque. They will have a lot of money. That's the most radical mosque in the whole Bosnia-Herzegovina. But it's under formal Islamic community. And it's not ever mentioned as a part about this story of these illegal religious communities. And that's the most radical. All those guys that actually performed some kind of terrorist activity in Bosnia-Herzegovina were part of that mosque, and nobody is mentioning that.

MALCOLM BRABANT: Certainly, the King Fahd Mosque doesn't welcome scrutiny. We were some distance away because of a sign at the entrance banning filming. Just a few moments after the call to prayer began, the police arrived.

WOMAN: The King Fahd guys were calling because they saw us filming. So I said, we are doing nothing wrong. What you can do, you can write our names and let it be, let us be.

MALCOLM BRABANT: I'm sorry. Yesterday, we were talking to the foreign relations guy in charge of the Islamic council, and we were told that there's absolutely no problem, they can be perfectly open about it, so what's the problem?

Via text messages, we complained about our half-hour encounter with the police to Colic of the Islamic community, who, despite his position, had been unable to allow us to film inside the mosque. He dismissed our complaints and also rejected the concerns of the former intelligence agent.

RAZIM COLIC: I simply don't agree with the officer.

MALCOLM BRABANT: So, what is the — the sort of message that is coming out those mosques then?

RAZIM COLIC: I don't know that we don't have — the message...

(CROSSTALK)

MALCOLM BRABANT: Do you monitor the mosques?

RAZIM COLIC: Sorry?

MALCOLM BRABANT: Do you monitor the mosques to hear what they're saying?

RAZIM COLIC: Yes, yes, yes, of course.

MALCOLM BRABANT: How frequently do you do that?

RAZIM COLIC: On a daily basis, because we have five times a day prayer there. Our imams, the three of them are there.

MALCOLM BRABANT: Late last month, Margaret Cormack, the piano-playing U.S. ambassador, hosted CIA Director John Brennan when he made a surprise visit to Sarajevo to discuss the country's counterterrorism efforts.

Ambassador Cormack regards the Bosnian Islamic community as a crucial partner in the battle against radicalization. But she had a clear message for Muslim nations and their vested interests.

MAUREEN CORMACK: We need these countries to allow Bosnia and Herzegovina to maintain its traditional moderate version of Islam.

MALCOLM BRABANT: Given the uncertainty about which Muslims potentially pose the greatest risk, can she be certain that the U.S. and its allies are getting the right information from Sarajevo?

MAUREEN CORMACK: Certainly, all the U.S. security teams who either work inside of our embassy or who have visited from Washington feel that we have a really positive, open information-sharing with our colleagues, our counterparts in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

We don't have a sense that there are blockages in that. What we have worked with them on is establishing better information-sharing between the services here in the country, and I think that they're making progress in that regard as well.

MALCOLM BRABANT: Analysts like Dino Abazovic, a specialist in conflict and its aftermath, are certain that poverty is also a precursor for radicalization.

DINO ABAZOVIC, University of Sarajevo: A number of people, particularly youngsters, younger generation are seeing no future in the way of their prospects for employment and all these things. More than 40 percent of Bosnia population is officially unemployed.

In that respect, I would say is the kind of circumstances that are fertilizing a fertile ground for different kinds of radicalization. So, unfortunately, anyone who neglects social and economic situation that these people are living in are — I think is wrong.

MALCOLM BRABANT: Bosnia's enduring economic crisis requires members of the country's top rock band, Konvoj, to take second jobs to support their music careers. They are advocates for the ideal of Sarajevo as a multicultural city and are horrified by increasing international hostility towards Muslims.

MAN: It's pretty — wow, what's happening now in the world?

BOJAN CRNOGORAC, Drummer: I have been with these people all of my life. My best friend is a Muslim. He was the best man at my wedding. I was the best man at his wedding. My parents told me not to divide people according to nationality or ethnic.

People here are normal. I think that's the kind of media stuff that's pumping all this situation in Bosnia.

MALCOLM BRABANT: International officials are convinced that Bosnia's European, Westernized moderate Muslims are the best possible bulwark against radicalization. But in a country awash with weapons left over from the war, the need for enhanced vigilance is paramount.

Saudi Arabia Quietly Spreads its Brand of Puritanical Islam in Indonesia

<https://www.voanews.com/a/saudi-arabia-quietly-spreads-its-brand-of-puritanical-islam-in-indonesia-/3679287.html>

VOANews, January 17, 2017 7:21 AM , [Kriethika Varagur](#)

JAKARTA —

When Ulil Abshar-Abdalla was a teenager in Pati, Central Java, he placed first in an Arabic class held at his local madrasa. The prize was six months of tuition at the Institute for the Study of Islam and Arabic (LIPIA), a Jakarta university founded and funded by the Saudi Arabian government. At the end of six months, LIPIA offered him another six. He stayed on.

After that, it offered him four more years of free tuition to obtain a bachelor's degree in Islamic law, or shariah. He accepted that too. In 1993, after five years at LIPIA, he was offered a scholarship to continue his studies in Riyadh. He finally said no.



FILE - Students pray during the first day of the holy month of Ramadan at Al-Mukmin Islamic boarding school in Solo, in Indonesia's Central Java province, August 1, 2011.

“Once you accept that, you’re on their payroll for life,” Abshar-Abdalla told VOA. “But they made it awfully easy to stick around. I’m from a poor family, and it was quite tempting... I think they managed to pull a few good minds from my generation that way.”

Since 1980, Saudi Arabia has been using education to quietly spread Salafism, its brand of puritanical Islam, in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation. The two main arms of this effort are LIPIA and scholarships for higher education in Saudi Arabia.

Salafism is an ultra-conservative reform movement that advocates a return to Koranic times. LIPIA teaches Wahhabi Madhab, a strain of Salafi Islam expounded by the medieval Sunni theologian Ibn Taimiyah.

“Saudi alumni” are now visible in many arenas of Indonesian public life, holding positions in Muhammadiyah, the Prosperous Justice Party, and the Cabinet. Some have also become preachers and religious teachers, spreading Salafism across the archipelago.

The effects of Saudi Arabia’s massive soft power exercise on the Indonesian citizenry are just starting to become clear.

'The most important post in Jakarta'

The nexus of Saudi educational diplomacy is the religious attaché, a special office affiliated with its embassy in Jakarta. The office grants scholarships for students to study in Saudi Arabia, although the current attaché, Saad Namase, refused to confirm how many students were involved.

“We don’t really work with the Indonesian government,” said Namase. “We just try to strengthen cultural ties between our two countries by, for example, holding Quranic recitation competitions.” On the topic of scholarships, he said many countries, including the Netherlands and the U.S. offer scholarships to Indonesian students and the Saudi program was just one among many.



FILE - A teacher gestures during an Islam personality class during the holy month of Ramadan at the Al-Mukmin Islamic boarding school in Solo, Indonesia Central Java province, Aug. 2, 2011.

“The Saudi religious attaché is the most important post in Jakarta,” said Abshar-Abdalla, who now runs the Liberal Islam Network. “It is the portal for all Saudi efforts to influence Indonesian culture.”

The attaché’s office also pays the salary of prominent Salafi preachers and supplies Arabic teachers to boarding schools across Indonesia, according to Din Wahid, an expert on Indonesia Salafism at the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University in Jakarta.

Beyond the attaché’s office, several Saudi Arabian universities directly offer scholarships to Indonesian students.

One reason the Indonesian government is unlikely to present roadblocks to Saudi cultural expansion is its precarious annual Hajj quota, according to Dadi Darmadi, a UIN researcher who focuses on the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.



FILE - Indonesian Haj pilgrims walk towards their flight at the airport in Solo, Central Java province, Indonesia, Sept. 17, 2015, in this photo taken by Antara Foto.

“We were just granted 10,000 extra Hajj permits this year, which is still a drop in the bucket considering Indonesia’s population of 203 million Muslims,” said Darmadi, “I think Indonesia would hesitate to antagonize Saudi Arabia and prompt cuts to that hard-won quota.”

Divergent paths

Hidayat Nur Wahid, a member of Indonesia’s House of Representatives and a leader of the right-wing Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), is one of the most prominent national politicians who have passed through Saudi universities. He studied, through a series of scholarships, for an undergraduate, master’s and doctorate degree in theology and history of Islamic thought at the Islamic University of Medina.



FILE -- In this July 5, 2013 file photo, worshipers visit the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, Saudi Arabia.

“The majority of Islamic texts are in Arabic, which is why I wanted to study in Saudi Arabia,” Nur Wahid told VOA. “Plus, the spirit of the Prophet Muhammad animates Medina. I enjoyed my years there.”

Nur Wahid said he was not exposed to radicalism or "anti-social" teachings in Medina. “We just learned how to be good Muslims. And it’s a misconception that everyone who studies in Saudi Arabia becomes a preacher or religious teacher. Many graduates become officials or politicians like me.”

“Since it is the place where Islam originated, many students think that Saudi Arabia represents authentic Islam,” researcher Din Wahid.

Saudi theology had the opposite effect on Abshar-Abdalla, who gradually grew disenchanted with the Salafi movement during his five years at LIPIA.

“Although I had some short-lived enthusiasm for that simplistic theology, I found it to be puritanical at its core,” said Abshar-Abdalla. Instead, he started to read various other Islamic texts on his own, including Sufi and Shia ones, and eventually founded the Liberal Islam Network (JIL) in 2001.

Ironically, he himself was once recruited for the student movement that would develop into PKS. “I was invited for a rafting trip in Bogor one weekend at university, and I realized they were trying to get me to join Tarbiyah, the embryo of the current PKS party,” said Abshar-Abdalla. “I sort of ran in the opposite direction.”

Extremist connection

Although Saudi-educated preachers in Indonesia might be causing a subtle rightward shift in national ideology, a more immediate concern is whether Salafi teachings encourage terrorism or extremism.

“By and large, I think not, because official Salafism is quietist, or apolitical, in order to preserve the authority of Saudi royalty in its homeland,” said Wahid. “That being said, when this ideology migrates back to Southeast Asia, all bets are off.”

One prominent example of non-quietist, or jihadist, ideology is the Salafi-influenced Ngruki pesantren in Solo, Central Java, which has incubated a number of known Indonesian terrorists.

And Zaitun Rasmin, a graduate of Medina Islamic University, was one of the chief organizers of the hardline demonstrations against the governor of Jakarta in late 2016. “He’s an example of an Indonesian Salafist who is unconcerned with being ‘apolitical,’” said Wahid.

Wahid’s point is that, for all the resources Saudi Arabia is directing towards Indonesian students, it remains to be seen how exactly Salafi ideology evolves in its new Southeast Asian context. “There are three ‘flavors’ of Salafi ideology: quietist, political, and jihadist. We don’t know what exactly it looks like in Indonesia. All we know is that it’s here, and it’s growing.”

Articles to Support Question 3

A Quick Turnaround Assessment of the White House Intelligence Report Issued on April 11, 2017 About the Nerve Agent Attack in Khan Shaykhun, Syria.

https://www.scribd.com/document/344995943/Report-by-White-House-Alleging-Proof-of-Syria-as-the-Perpetrator-of-the-Nerve-Agent-Attack-in-Khan-Shaykhun-on-April-4-2017#from_embed

Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From C.I.A.

By [C. J. CHIVERS](#) and [ERIC SCHMITT](#), MARCH 24, 2013, New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html>

With help from the C.I.A., Arab governments and Turkey have sharply increased their military aid to Syria's opposition fighters in recent months, expanding a secret airlift of arms and equipment for the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad, according to air traffic data, interviews with officials in several countries and the accounts of rebel commanders.

The airlift, which began on a small scale in early 2012 and continued intermittently through last fall, expanded into a steady and much heavier flow late last year, the data shows. It has grown to include more than 160 military cargo flights by Jordanian, Saudi and Qatari military-style cargo planes landing at Esenboga Airport near Ankara, and, to a lesser degree, at other Turkish and Jordanian airports.

As it evolved, the airlift correlated with shifts in the war within Syria, as rebels drove Syria's army from territory by the middle of last year. And even as the Obama administration has publicly refused to give more than "nonlethal" aid to the rebels, the involvement of the C.I.A. in the arms shipments — albeit mostly in a consultative role, American officials say — has shown that the United States is more willing to help its Arab allies support the lethal side of the civil war.

From offices at secret locations, American intelligence officers have helped the Arab governments shop for weapons, including a large procurement from Croatia, and have vetted rebel commanders and groups to determine who should receive the weapons as they arrive, according to American officials speaking on the condition of anonymity. The C.I.A. declined to comment on the shipments or its role in them. The shipments also highlight the competition for Syria's future between Sunni Muslim states and Iran, the Shiite theocracy that remains Mr. Assad's main ally. Secretary of State John Kerry pressed Iraq on Sunday to do more to halt Iranian arms shipments through its airspace; he did so even as the most recent military cargo flight from Qatar for the rebels landed at Esenboga early Sunday night.

Syrian opposition figures and some American lawmakers and officials have argued that Russian and Iranian arms shipments to support Mr. Assad's government have made arming the rebels more necessary.

Most of the cargo flights have occurred since November, after the presidential election in the United States and as the Turkish and Arab governments grew more frustrated by the rebels' slow progress

against Mr. Assad's well-equipped military. The flights also became more frequent as the humanitarian crisis inside Syria deepened in the winter and cascades of refugees crossed into neighboring countries. The Turkish government has had oversight over much of the program, down to affixing transponders to trucks ferrying the military goods through Turkey so it might monitor shipments as they move by land into Syria, officials said. The scale of shipments was very large, according to officials familiar with the pipeline and to an arms-trafficking investigator who assembled data on the cargo planes involved. "A conservative estimate of the payload of these flights would be 3,500 tons of military equipment," said Hugh Griffiths, of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, who monitors illicit arms transfers.

"The intensity and frequency of these flights," he added, are "suggestive of a well-planned and coordinated clandestine military logistics operation."

Although rebel commanders and the data indicate that Qatar and Saudi Arabia had been shipping military materials via Turkey to the opposition since early and late 2012, respectively, a major hurdle was removed late last fall after the Turkish government agreed to allow the pace of air shipments to accelerate, officials said.

Simultaneously, arms and equipment were being [purchased by Saudi Arabia in Croatia](#) and flown to Jordan on Jordanian cargo planes for rebels working in southern Syria and for retransfer to Turkey for rebels groups operating from there, several officials said.

These multiple logistics streams throughout the winter formed what one former American official who was briefed on the program called "a cataract of weaponry."

American officials, rebel commanders and a Turkish opposition politician have described the Arab roles as an open secret, but have also said the program is freighted with risk, including the possibility of drawing Turkey or Jordan actively into the war and of provoking military action by Iran. Still, rebel commanders have criticized the shipments as insufficient, saying the quantities of weapons they receive are too small and the types too light to fight Mr. Assad's military effectively. They also accused those distributing the weapons of being parsimonious or corrupt.

"The outside countries give us weapons and bullets little by little," said Abdel Rahman Ayachi, a commander in Soqor al-Sham, an Islamist fighting group in northern Syria. He made a gesture as if switching on and off a tap. "They open and they close the way to the bullets like water," he said.

Two other commanders, Hassan Aboud of Soqor al-Sham and Abu Ayman of Ahrar al-Sham, another Islamist group, said that whoever was vetting which groups receive the weapons was doing an inadequate job.

"There are fake Free Syrian Army brigades claiming to be revolutionaries, and when they get the weapons they sell them in trade," Mr. Aboud said. The former American official noted that the size of the shipments and the degree of distributions are voluminous.

“People hear the amounts flowing in, and it is huge,” he said. “But they burn through a million rounds of ammo in two weeks.”

A Tentative Start

The airlift to Syrian rebels began slowly. On Jan. 3, 2012, months after the crackdown by the Alawite-led government against antigovernment demonstrators had morphed into a military campaign, a pair of Qatar Emiri Air Force C-130 transport aircraft touched down in Istanbul, according to air traffic data. They were a vanguard.

Weeks later, the Syrian Army besieged Homs, Syria’s third largest city. Artillery and tanks pounded neighborhoods. Ground forces moved in.



Even with the weapons from abroad, rebels say they are hard pressed to fight the government. Credit Abdalghne Karoof/Reuters

Across the country, the army and loyalist militias were trying to stamp out the rebellion with force — further infuriating Syria’s Sunni Arab majority, which was severely outgunned. The rebels called for international help, and more weapons.

By late midspring the first stream of cargo flights from an Arab state began, according to air traffic data and information from plane spotters.

On a string of nights from April 26 through May 4, a Qatari Air Force C-17 — a huge American-made cargo plane — made six landings in Turkey, at Esenboga Airport. By Aug. 8 the Qataris had made 14 more cargo flights. All came from Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, a hub for American military logistics in the Middle East.

Qatar has denied providing any arms to the rebels. A Qatari official, who requested anonymity, said Qatar has shipped in only what he called nonlethal aid. He declined to answer further questions. It is not clear whether Qatar has purchased and supplied the arms alone or is also providing air transportation service for other donors. But American and other Western officials, and rebel commanders, have said Qatar has been an active arms supplier — so much so that the United States became concerned about some of the Islamist groups that Qatar has armed.

The Qatari flights aligned with the tide-turning military campaign by rebel forces in the northern province of Idlib, as their campaign of ambushes, roadside bombs and attacks on isolated outposts began driving Mr. Assad's military and supporting militias from parts of the countryside.

As flights continued into the summer, the rebels also opened an offensive in that city — a battle that soon bogged down.

The former American official said David H. Petraeus, the C.I.A. director until November, had been instrumental in helping to get this aviation network moving and had prodded various countries to work together on it. Mr. Petraeus did not return multiple e-mails asking for comment.

The American government became involved, the former American official said, in part because there was a sense that other states would arm the rebels anyhow. The C.I.A. role in facilitating the shipments, he said, gave the United States a degree of influence over the process, including trying to steer weapons away from Islamist groups and persuading donors to withhold portable anti-aircraft missiles that might be used in future terrorist attacks on civilian aircraft.

American officials have confirmed that senior White House officials were regularly briefed on the shipments. "These countries were going to do it one way or another," the former official said. "They weren't asking for a 'Mother, may I?' from us. But if we could help them in certain ways, they'd appreciate that."

Through the fall, the Qatari Air Force cargo fleet became even more busy, running flights almost every other day in October. But the rebels were clamoring for even more weapons, continuing to assert that they lacked the firepower to fight a military armed with tanks, artillery, multiple rocket launchers and aircraft.

Many were also complaining, saying they were hearing from arms donors that the Obama administration was limiting their supplies and blocking the distribution of the anti-aircraft and anti-armor weapons they most sought. These complaints continue.

"Arming or not arming, lethal or nonlethal — it all depends on what America says," said Mohammed Abu Ahmed, who leads a band of anti-Assad fighters in Idlib Province.

The Breakout

Soon, other players joined the airlift: In November, three Royal Jordanian Air Force C-130s landed in Esenboga, in a hint at what would become a stepped-up Jordanian and Saudi role.

Within three weeks, two other Jordanian cargo planes began making a round-trip run between Amman, the capital of Jordan, and Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, where, officials from several countries said, the aircraft were picking up a large Saudi purchase of infantry arms from a Croatian-controlled stockpile.

The first flight returned to Amman on Dec. 15, according to intercepts of a transponder from one of the aircraft recorded by a plane spotter in Cyprus and air traffic control data from an aviation official in the region.

In all, records show that two Jordanian Ilyushins bearing the logo of the Jordanian International Air Cargo firm but flying under Jordanian military call signs made a combined 36 round-trip flights between

Amman and Croatia from December through February. The same two planes made five flights between Amman and Turkey this January.

As the Jordanian flights were under way, the Qatari flights continued and the Royal Saudi Air Force began a busy schedule, too — making at least 30 C-130 flights into Esenboga from mid-February to early March this year, according to flight data provided by a regional air traffic control official. Several of the Saudi flights were spotted coming and going at Ankara by civilians, who alerted opposition politicians in Turkey.

“The use of Turkish airspace at such a critical time, with the conflict in Syria across our borders, and by foreign planes from countries that are known to be central to the conflict, defines Turkey as a party in the conflict,” said Atilla Kart, a member of the Turkish Parliament from the C.H.P. opposition party, who confirmed details about several Saudi shipments. “The government has the responsibility to respond to these claims.”

Turkish and Saudi Arabian officials declined to discuss the flights or any arms transfers. The Turkish government has not officially approved military aid to Syrian rebels.

Croatia and Jordan both denied any role in moving arms to the Syrian rebels. Jordanian aviation officials went so far as to insist that no cargo flights occurred.

The director of cargo for Jordanian International Air Cargo, Muhammad Jubour, insisted on March 7 that his firm had no knowledge of any flights to or from Croatia.

“This is all lies,” he said. “We never did any such thing.”

A regional air traffic official who has been researching the flights confirmed the flight data, and offered an explanation. “Jordanian International Air Cargo,” the official said, “is a front company for Jordan’s air force.”

After being informed of the air-traffic control and transponder data that showed the plane’s routes, Mr. Jubour, from the cargo company, claimed that his firm did not own any Ilyushin cargo planes.

Asked why his employer’s Web site still displayed images of two Ilyushin-76MFs and text claiming they were part of the company fleet, Mr. Jubour had no immediate reply. That night the company’s Web site was taken down.

U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels

By [MARK MAZZETTI](#) and [MATT APUZZO](#), JAN. 23, 2016, New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/world/middleeast/us-relies-heavily-on-saudi-money-to-support-syrian-rebels.html>

WASHINGTON — When President Obama secretly authorized the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) to begin arming [Syria](#)’s embattled rebels in 2013, the spy agency knew it would have a willing partner to help pay for the covert operation. It was the same partner the [C.I.A.](#) has relied on for decades for money and discretion in far-off conflicts: the Kingdom of [Saudi Arabia](#).

Since then, the C.I.A. and its Saudi counterpart have maintained an unusual arrangement for the rebel-training mission, which the Americans have code-named Timber Sycamore. Under the deal, current and former administration officials said, the Saudis contribute both weapons and large sums of money, and the C.I.A. takes the lead in training the rebels on AK-47 assault rifles and tank-destroying missiles.

The support for the Syrian rebels is only the latest chapter in the decadeslong relationship between the spy services of [Saudi Arabia](#) and the United States, an alliance that has endured through the Iran-contra scandal, support for the mujahedeen against the Soviets in Afghanistan and proxy fights in Africa. Sometimes, as in [Syria](#), the two countries have worked in concert. In others, Saudi Arabia has simply written checks underwriting American covert activities.

The joint arming and training program, which other Middle East nations contribute money to, continues as America's relations with Saudi Arabia — and the kingdom's place in the region — are in flux. The old ties of cheap oil and geopolitics that have long bound the countries together have loosened as America's dependence on foreign oil declines and the Obama administration tiptoes toward a diplomatic rapprochement with Iran.

And yet the alliance persists, kept afloat on a sea of Saudi money and a recognition of mutual self-interest. In addition to Saudi Arabia's vast oil reserves and role as the spiritual anchor of the Sunni Muslim world, the long intelligence relationship helps explain why the United States has been reluctant to openly criticize Saudi Arabia for its human rights abuses, its treatment of women and its support for the [extreme strain of Islam, Wahhabism](#), that has inspired many of the very terrorist groups the United States is fighting. The Obama administration did not publicly condemn Saudi Arabia's [beheading this month](#) of a dissident Shiite cleric, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, who had challenged the royal family.

Secrets of the Kingdom

Articles in this [series](#) examine the society, politics, religion and global influence of Saudi Arabia, one of the world's most secretive countries.

Although the Saudis have been public about their help arming rebel groups in Syria, the extent of their partnership with the C.I.A.'s covert action campaign and their direct financial support had not been disclosed. Details were pieced together in interviews with a half-dozen current and former American officials and sources from several Persian Gulf countries. Most spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the program.

From the moment the C.I.A. operation was started, Saudi money supported it.

“They understand that they have to have us, and we understand that we have to have them,” said Mike Rogers, the former Republican congressman from Michigan who was chairman of the [House Intelligence Committee](#) when the C.I.A. operation began. Mr. Rogers declined to discuss details of the classified program.

American officials have not disclosed the amount of the Saudi contribution, which is by far the largest from another nation to the program to arm the rebels against President Bashar al-Assad's military. But estimates have put the total cost of the arming and training effort at several billion dollars.

The White House has embraced the covert financing from Saudi Arabia — and from Qatar, Jordan and Turkey — at a time when Mr. Obama has pushed gulf nations to take a greater security role in the region.

Spokesmen for both the C.I.A. and the Saudi Embassy in Washington declined to comment.

When Mr. Obama signed off on [arming the rebels](#) in the spring of 2013, it was partly to try to gain control of the apparent free-for-all in the region. The Qataris and the Saudis had been funneling weapons into Syria for more than a year. The Qataris had even smuggled in [shipments of Chinese-made FN-6 shoulder-fired missiles](#) over the border from Turkey.



King Salman of Saudi Arabia and President Barack Obama in September at the White House. Credit Gary Cameron/Reuters

The Saudi efforts were led by the flamboyant Prince Bandar bin Sultan, at the time the intelligence chief, who directed Saudi spies to buy thousands of AK-47s and millions of rounds of ammunition in Eastern Europe for the Syrian rebels. The C.I.A. helped arrange some of the arms purchases for the Saudis, including a large deal in Croatia in 2012.

By the summer of 2012, a freewheeling feel had taken hold along Turkey’s border with Syria as the gulf nations funneled cash and weapons to rebel groups — even some that American officials were concerned had ties to radical groups like Al Qaeda.

The C.I.A. was mostly on the sidelines during this period, authorized by the White House under the Timber Sycamore training program to deliver nonlethal aid to the rebels but not weapons. In late 2012, according to two former senior American officials, David H. Petraeus, then the C.I.A. director, delivered a stern lecture to intelligence officials of several gulf nations at a meeting near the Dead Sea in Jordan. He chastised them for sending arms into Syria without coordinating with one another or with C.I.A. officers in Jordan and Turkey.

Months later, Mr. Obama gave his approval for the C.I.A. to begin directly arming and training the rebels from a base in Jordan, amending the Timber Sycamore program to allow lethal assistance. Under the new arrangement, the C.I.A. took the lead in training, while Saudi Arabia’s intelligence agency, the General Intelligence Directorate, provided money and weapons, including TOW anti-tank missiles.

The Qataris have also helped finance the training and allowed a Qatari base to be used as an additional training location. But American officials said Saudi Arabia was by far the largest contributor to the operation.

Aboard an American warship, complete with a lavishly decorated tent and sheep for slaughter, King Ibn Saud prepared to meet with President Franklin D. Roosevelt to secure an agreement providing oil in exchange for military support.

The New York Times

[See full article in TimesMachine](#)

While the Obama administration saw this coalition as a selling point in Congress, some, including Senator Ron Wyden, an Oregon Democrat, raised questions about why the C.I.A. needed Saudi money for the operation, according to one former American official. Mr. Wyden declined to be interviewed, but his office released a statement calling for more transparency. “Senior officials have said publicly that the U.S. is trying to build up the battlefield capabilities of the anti-Assad opposition, but they haven’t provided the public with details about how this is being done, which U.S. agencies are involved, or which foreign partners those agencies are working with,” the statement said.

When relations among the countries involved in the training program are strained, it often falls to the United States to broker solutions. As the host, Jordan expects regular payments from the Saudis and the Americans. When the Saudis pay late, according to a former senior intelligence official, the Jordanians complain to C.I.A. officials.

While the Saudis have financed previous C.I.A. missions with no strings attached, the money for Syria comes with expectations, current and former officials said. “They want a seat at the table, and a say in what the agenda of the table is going to be,” said Bruce Riedel, a former C.I.A. analyst and now a senior fellow at the [Brookings Institution](#).

The C.I.A. training program is separate from another program to arm Syrian rebels, one the Pentagon ran that has since ended. That program was designed to train rebels to combat Islamic State fighters in Syria, unlike the C.I.A.’s program, which focuses on rebel groups fighting the Syrian military.

While the intelligence alliance is central to the Syria fight and has been important in the war against Al Qaeda, a constant irritant in American-Saudi relations is just how much Saudi citizens continue to support terrorist groups, analysts said.



Prince Bandar bin Sultan, in a 2007 photo, directed Saudi spies to buy thousands of AK-47 assault rifles for Syrian rebels. Credit Hassan Ammar/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“The more that the argument becomes, ‘We need them as a counterterrorism partner,’ the less persuasive it is,” said William McCants, a former State Department counterterrorism adviser and the author of a [book on the Islamic State](#). “If this is purely a conversation about counterterrorism cooperation, and if the Saudis are a big part of the problem in creating terrorism in the first place, then how persuasive of an argument is it?”

In the near term, the alliance remains solid, strengthened by a bond between spy masters. Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the Saudi interior minister who took over the effort to arm the Syrian rebels from Prince Bandar, has known the C.I.A. director, John O. Brennan, from the time Mr. Brennan was the agency’s Riyadh station chief in the 1990s. Former colleagues say the two men remain close, and Prince Mohammed has won friends in Washington with his aggressive moves to dismantle terrorist groups like Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

The job Mr. Brennan once held in Riyadh is, more than the ambassador’s, the true locus of American power in the kingdom. Former diplomats recall that the most important discussions always flowed through the C.I.A. station chief.

Current and former intelligence officials say there is a benefit to this communication channel: The Saudis are far more responsive to American criticism when it is done in private, and this secret channel has done more to steer Saudi behavior toward America’s interests than any public chastising could have. The roots of the relationship run deep. In the late 1970s, the Saudis organized what was known as the “Safari Club” — a coalition of nations including Morocco, Egypt and France — that ran covert operations around Africa at a time when Congress had clipped the C.I.A.’s wings over years of abuses.

“And so the kingdom, with these countries, helped in some way, I believe, to keep the world safe at a time when the United States was not able to do that,” Prince Turki al-Faisal, a former head of Saudi intelligence, recalled in a speech at Georgetown University in 2002.

In the 1980s, the Saudis helped finance C.I.A. operations in Angola, where the United States backed rebels against the Soviet-allied government. While the Saudis were staunchly anticommunist, Riyadh’s primary incentive seemed to be to solidify its C.I.A. ties. “They were buying good will,” recalled one former senior intelligence officer who was involved in the operation.

In perhaps the most consequential episode, the Saudis helped arm the mujahedeen rebels to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan. The United States committed hundreds of millions of dollars each year to the mission, and the Saudis matched it, dollar for dollar.

The money flowed through a C.I.A.-run Swiss bank account. In the book “[Charlie Wilson’s War](#),” the journalist George Crile III describes how the C.I.A. arranged for the account to earn no interest, in keeping with the Islamic ban on usury.

In 1984, when the Reagan administration sought help with its secret plan to sell arms to Iran to finance the contra rebels in Nicaragua, Robert C. McFarlane, the national security adviser, met with Prince Bandar, who was the Saudi ambassador to Washington at the time. The White House made it clear that the Saudis would “gain a considerable amount of favor” by cooperating, Mr. McFarlane later recalled. Prince Bandar pledged \$1 million per month to help fund the contras, in recognition of the administration’s past support to the Saudis. The contributions continued after Congress cut off funding to the contras. By the end, the Saudis had contributed \$32 million, paid through a Cayman Islands bank account.

When the Iran-contra scandal broke, and questions arose about the Saudi role, the kingdom kept its secrets. Prince Bandar refused to cooperate with the investigation led by [Lawrence E. Walsh](#), the independent counsel.

In a letter, the prince declined to testify, explaining that his country’s “confidences and commitments, like our friendship, are given not just for the moment but the long run.”

Correction: January 31, 2016

An article last Sunday about the United States’ reliance on Saudi Arabia to help financially support the Syrian rebels referred incorrectly to the beheading of a Shiite cleric, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. While the execution was not kept secret, it was not a public execution.

Donald Trump Likely to End Aid for Rebels Fighting Syrian Government

By [DAVID E. SANGER](#) NOV. 11, 2016, New York Times

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/12/world/middleeast/donald-trump-syria.html?_r=0

WASHINGTON — President-elect [Donald J. Trump](#) said Friday that he was likely to abandon the American effort to support “moderate” opposition groups in [Syria](#) who are battling the government of President [Bashar al-Assad](#), saying “we have no idea who these people are.”

In an interview with The Wall Street Journal that dealt largely with economic issues, including his willingness to retain parts of the Affordable Care Act, he repeated a position he took often during his campaign: that the United States should focus on defeating the Islamic State, and find common ground with the Syrians and their Russian backers.

“I’ve had an opposite view of many people regarding Syria,” Mr. Trump told The Journal. “My attitude was you’re fighting Syria, Syria is fighting [ISIS](#), and you have to get rid of ISIS. [Russia](#) is now totally

aligned with Syria, and now you have [Iran](#), which is becoming powerful, because of us, is aligned with Syria.”

His comments suggest that once Mr. Trump begins overseeing both the public support for the opposition groups, and a far larger covert effort run by the [Central Intelligence Agency](#), he may wind down or abandon the effort. But there are in fact two wars going on simultaneously in Syria.

One is against the Islamic State, in which the United States is supporting 30,000 Syrian-Kurdish and Syrian-Arab fighters, who last weekend announced they were opening a new phase of the battle, beginning to encircle the ISIS capital in Raqqa. There are roughly 300 United States Special Operations forces on the ground assisting these militia.

The second effort is in support of rebels fighting Mr. Assad. The C.I.A. covert program is by far the largest conduit of support, providing antitank missiles to rebels fighting the government. That is the program that Mr. Trump seems most intent on ending. If the United States pursues that line, “We end up fighting Russia, fighting Syria,” Mr. Trump told The Journal.

The argument for ending the support may be bolstered by the fact that, as a matter of survival, those opposition groups have entered into battlefield alliances with the affiliate of [Al Qaeda](#) in Syria, formerly known as Al Nusra. This has had the effect of allowing Mr. Assad and Russia to argue that they are attacking Al Qaeda, and the United States should aid them in that effort. Secretary of State John Kerry acknowledged that argument during his ultimately failed effort to reach a deal for a cease-fire and an ultimate settlement.

Mr. Trump’s the-enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend logic is consistent with what he said during the campaign. “I’m not saying Assad is a good man, ‘cause he’s not,” he told The New York Times in an interview in March, “but our far greater problem is not Assad, it’s ISIS.”

But it also takes a position that will gratify President [Vladimir V. Putin](#), because it suggests that rather than pressure Russia to end its support of Mr. Assad, a Trump administration will get out of Mr. Putin’s way.

In another hint of a major change in policy, one of Mr. Trump’s primary national security advisers, Lt. General Michael T. Flynn, the retired head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, wrote in The Hill newspaper this week that the United States should extradite Fethullah Gulen who [Turkey](#) has demanded should be sent back from his exile in Pennsylvania. The Turkish government of [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#) has blamed him for a coup attempt over the summer.

The Justice Department has not yet concluded that there is any convincing evidence that Mr. Gulen should be sent back to almost certain confinement or execution under an extradition treaty with the United States. They see the request as part of Mr. Erdogan’s effort to eliminate all opposition.

Mr. Flynn adopted many of Turkey’s arguments about Mr. Gulen, arguing that “American taxpayers are helping finance Gulen’s 160 [charter schools](#)” in the United States, and that it is more important to support Turkey than be “hoodwinked by this masked source of terror and instability nestled comfortably in our own backyard.”

Washington's New Lock-Step March of Folly

October 22, 2016, Consortium News

<https://consortiumnews.com/2016/10/22/washingtons-new-lock-step-march-of-folly/>

By Robert Parry

As polls show Hillary Clinton closing in on victory, Official Washington's neoconservative (and liberal-hawk) foreign policy establishment is rubbing its hands in anticipation of more war and more strife, including a U.S. military escalation in Syria, a take-down of Iran, and a showdown with nuclear-armed Russia.



Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton speaking at an Atlantic Council event in 2013. (Photo credit: Atlantic Council)

What is perhaps most alarming about this new “group think” is that there doesn't appear to be any significant resistance to the expectation that President Hillary Clinton will unleash these neocon/liberal-hawk forces of intervention that President Barack Obama has somewhat restrained.

Assuming Donald Trump's defeat – increasingly seen as a foregone conclusion – the Republican leadership would mostly be in sync with Clinton if she adopts a hawkish foreign policy similar to what was pursued by President George W. Bush. Meanwhile, most Democrats would be hesitant to challenge their party's new president.

The only potential option to constrain the hawkish Clinton would be the emergence of a “peace” wing of the Democratic Party, possibly aligned with Republican anti-interventionists. But that possibility remains problematic especially since those two political elements have major policy disagreements on a wide variety of other topics.

There also isn't an obvious individual for the peace factions to organize around. Sen. Bernie Sanders, who mildly criticized Clinton's advocacy of “regime change” operations during the primary campaign, is 75 years old and isn't particularly known for his stands on foreign policy issues.

If Trump loses, the bombastic real-estate mogul would likely be a spent political force, possibly retreating into the paranoid “alt-right” world of conspiracy theories. Even now, his dovish objection to confronting Russia has been undermined by his tendency to speak carelessly about other national security topics, such as torture, terrorism and nuclear weapons.

One potential leader of a peace movement would be Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, D-Hawaii, a 35-year-old military veteran who is one of the few members of Congress to offer an insightful and courageous critique of the dangers from an interventionist foreign policy. But Gabbard would be putting her promising political career at risk if she challenged a sitting Democratic president, especially early in Clinton's White House term.

Yet, without a modern-day Eugene McCarthy (the anti-Vietnam War Democrat who took on President Lyndon Johnson in 1968) to rally an anti-war movement from inside the Democratic Party, it is hard to imagine how significant political pressure could be put on a President Hillary Clinton. Virtually the entire mainstream U.S. media (and much of the progressive media) are onboard for a U.S. "regime change" operation in Syria and for getting tough with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Not Thought Through

These "group thinks" on Syria and Russia, like previous ones on Iraq and Libya, have not been thought through, but are driven instead by emotional appeals – photos of wounded children in Syria and animosity toward Putin for not wearing a shirt and not bowing to U.S. global supremacy. As with Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011, there is little consideration about what might follow a successful "regime change" scenario in Syria or Russia.

In Syria, a "no-fly zone" destroying Syria's air force and air defenses could pave the way for a victory by Al Qaeda's recently renamed Nusra Front and/or Al Qaeda's spinoff, the Islamic State. How letting major terrorist groups control Damascus would be good for either the Syrian people or the United States gets barely mentioned.

The dreamy thinking is that somehow the hard-to-find "moderate" rebels – sometimes called the "unicorns" – would prevail, even though they have existed mostly as cut-outs and conduits so Al Qaeda and its allies can secure advanced U.S. weapons to use for killing Syrian soldiers.

Yet, even more dangerous is the already-launched destabilization campaign against nuclear-armed Russia, a policy that may feel-good because we're taught to despise Vladimir Putin. But this latest neocon/liberal-hawk "regime change" scheme — even if it somehow were "successful" — is not likely to install in the Kremlin one of the U.S.-favored "liberals" who would allow the resumption of the 1990s-era plundering of Russia's wealth.

Far more likely, an angry Russian population would go for a much-harder-line nationalist than Putin, someone who might see nuclear weapons as the only way to protect Mother Russia from another raping by the West. It's not the cold-blooded Putin who should scare Americans, but the hot-headed guy next in line.

But none of these downsides – not even the existential downside of nuclear annihilation – is allowed to be discussed among Official Washington's foreign policy elites. It's all about giving Bashar al-Assad the "Gaddafi treatment" in Syria, punishing Iran even if that might cause its leaders to renounce the nuclear-arms agreement, and muscling NATO forces up to Russia's borders and making the Russian economy scream.

And, behind these policies are some of the most skilled propagandists in the world. They are playing much of the U.S. population – and surely the U.S. media – like a fiddle.

Lock-Step Consensus

The propaganda campaign is driven by a consensus among the major think tanks of Official Washington, where there is near universal support for Hillary Clinton, not because they all particularly like her, but because she has signaled a return to neocon/liberal-hawk strategies.



Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright speaking at an Atlantic Council event.

As Greg Jaffe [wrote](#) for the neocon-dominated Washington Post on Friday, “In the rarefied world of the Washington foreign policy establishment, President Obama’s departure from the White House — and the possible return of a more conventional and hawkish Hillary Clinton — is being met with quiet relief. “The Republicans and Democrats who make up the foreign policy elite are laying the groundwork for a more assertive American foreign policy, via a flurry of reports shaped by officials who are likely to play senior roles in a potential Clinton White House.

“It is not unusual for Washington’s establishment to launch major studies in the final months of an administration to correct the perceived mistakes of a president or influence his successor. But the bipartisan nature of the recent recommendations, coming at a time when the country has never been more polarized, reflects a remarkable consensus among the foreign policy elite.

“This consensus is driven by a broad-based backlash against a president who has repeatedly stressed the dangers of overreach and the need for restraint, especially in the Middle East. ... Taken together, the studies and reports call for more-aggressive American action to constrain Iran, rein in the chaos in the Middle East and check Russia in Europe.”

One of the lead organizations revving up these military adventures and also counting on a big boost in military spending under President Clinton-45 is the Atlantic Council, a think tank associated with NATO that has been pushing for a major confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia.

Jaffe quotes former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who is leading the Atlantic Council’s bipartisan Mideast team as saying about Syria: “The immediate thing is to do something to alleviate the horrors that are being visited on the population. ... We do think there needs to be more American action — not ground forces but some additional help in terms of the military aspect.” (This is same “humanitarian” Albright who – in responding to a United Nations report that U.S. economic sanctions

on Iraq in the 1990s had killed a half million Iraqi children – coldly said, “we think the price is worth it.”)

One of Albright’s partners on the Atlantic Council’s report, Bush’s last National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, added that if Assad continues to bomb civilians, the United States should strongly consider “using standoff weapons, like cruise missiles, to neutralize his air force so that he cannot fly.” The plans call for “safe zones” where Syrian rebels can base themselves behind U.S. military protection, allowing them to strike Syrian government forces but preventing the Syrian government from striking back. Little attention is paid to the fact that the so-called “moderate” rebels have refused to separate themselves from Al Qaeda’s forces who are in command of the rebel movement in east Aleppo and other urban areas.

As journalist/historian Gareth Porter has [written](#): “Information from a wide range of sources, including some of those the United States has been explicitly supporting, makes it clear that every armed anti-Assad organization unit in those provinces [of Idlib and Aleppo] is engaged in a military structure controlled by [Al Qaeda’s] Nusra militants. All of these rebel groups fight alongside the Nusra Front and coordinate their military activities with it. ...

“At least since 2014 the Obama administration has armed a number of Syrian rebel groups even though it knew the groups were coordinating closely with the Nusra Front, which was simultaneously getting arms from Turkey and Qatar.”

Ignoring the Masses

It also doesn’t seem to matter to these elites that many American commoners are fed up with these costly and bloody “regime change” schemes. As Hadley told the Post’s Jaffe, “Everyone has kind of given up on the Middle East. We have been at it for 15 years, and a lot of Americans think it is hopeless. ... We think it is not.”



Former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley speaking before the Atlantic Council.

But it is not just the Republican neocons and old Democratic hawks who are determined to whip the American people into line behind more war. As Jaffe wrote, “A similar sentiment animates the left-leaning Center for American Progress’s report, which calls for more military action to counter Iranian aggression, more dialogue with the United States’ Arab allies and more support for economic and human rights reform in the region.”

These “liberal hawks” are enthused that now almost the entire foreign policy elite of Official Washington is singing from the same sheet of martial music. There is none of the discord that surrounded Bush’s war in Iraq last decade.

As Brian Katulis, a senior Middle East analyst at the Center for American Progress, said, “The dynamic is totally different from what I saw a decade ago.” He added that the current focus from all sides is on rebuilding a more muscular and more “centrist internationalism.”

In other words, the Iraq War “group think” that enveloped Official Washington before that catastrophe wasn’t total enough. Now, there is almost a totalitarian feel about the way the foreign policy elites, coordinating with the major U.S. news media, are marching the American people toward possibly even worse disasters.

No serious dissent is allowed; no contrarian thoughts expressed; no thinking through where the schemes might end up – unless you want to be marginalized as an Assad “apologist” or a Putin “puppet.” And right now, there doesn’t seem to be any practical way to stop this new march of folly.

Syria Rebels Draw Closer to al Qaeda-Linked Group Move follows collapse of cease-fire and devastating strikes on rebel-held parts of Aleppo

By Maria Abi-Habib

Sept. 29, 2016 9:12 p.m. ET

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/syria-rebels-draw-closer-to-al-qaeda-linked-group-1475197943>

In Syria, militias armed by the Pentagon fight those armed by the CIA

Nabih Bulos, [W.J. Hennigan](#) and [Brian Bennett](#), [Contact Reporters](#), March 27, 2016, LATimes

<http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-cia-pentagon-isis-20160327-story.html>

Syrian militias armed by different parts of the U.S. war machine have begun to fight each other on the plains between the besieged city of Aleppo and the Turkish border, highlighting how little control U.S. intelligence officers and military planners have over the groups they have financed and trained in the bitter five-year-old [civil war](#).

The fighting has intensified over the last two months, as [CIA](#)-armed units and Pentagon-armed ones have repeatedly shot at each other while maneuvering through contested territory on the northern outskirts of Aleppo, U.S. officials and rebel leaders have confirmed.

In mid-February, a CIA-armed militia called Fursan al Haq, or Knights of Righteousness, was run out of the town of Marea, about 20 miles north of Aleppo, by Pentagon-backed Syrian Democratic Forces moving in from Kurdish-controlled areas to the east.

“Any faction that attacks us, regardless from where it gets its support, we will fight it,” Maj. Fares Bayoush, a leader of Fursan al Haq, said in an interview.

Rebel fighters described similar clashes in the town of Azaz, a key transit point for fighters and supplies between Aleppo and the Turkish border, and on March 3 in the Aleppo neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsud.

The attacks by one U.S.-backed group against another come amid continued heavy fighting in Syria and illustrate the difficulty facing U.S. efforts to coordinate among dozens of armed groups that are trying to overthrow the government of President [Bashar Assad](#), fight the [Islamic State](#) militant group and battle one another all at the same time.



“It is an enormous challenge,” said Rep. [Adam Schiff](#) (D-Burbank), the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, who described the clashes between U.S.-supported groups as “a fairly new phenomenon.”

“It is part of the three-dimensional chess that is the Syrian battlefield,” he said.

The area in northern Syria around Aleppo, the country's second-largest city, features not only a war between the Assad government and its opponents, but also periodic battles against Islamic State militants, who control much of eastern Syria and also some territory to the northwest of the city, and long-standing tensions among the ethnic groups that inhabit the area, Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen.

“This is a complicated, multi-sided war where our options are severely limited,” said a U.S. official, who wasn't authorized to speak publicly on the matter. “We know we need a partner on the ground. We can't defeat ISIL without that part of the equation, so we keep trying to forge those relationships.” ISIL is an acronym for Islamic State.

President Obama this month authorized a new Pentagon plan to train and arm Syrian rebel fighters, relaunching a program that was suspended in the fall after a string of embarrassing setbacks which included recruits being ambushed and handing over much of their U.S.-issued ammunition and trucks to an Al Qaeda affiliate.

Amid the setbacks, the Pentagon late last year deployed about 50 special operations forces to Kurdish-held areas in northeastern Syria to better coordinate with local militias and help ensure U.S.-backed rebel groups aren't fighting one another. But such skirmishes have become routine.

Last year, the Pentagon helped create a new military coalition, the Syrian Democratic Forces. The goal was to arm the group and prepare it to take territory away from the Islamic State in eastern Syria and to provide information for U.S. airstrikes.



The group is dominated by Kurdish outfits known as People's Protection Units or YPG. A few Arab units have joined the force in order to prevent it from looking like an invading Kurdish army, and it has received air-drops of weapons and supplies and assistance from U.S. Special Forces.

Gen. Joseph Votel, now commander of U.S. Special Operations Command and the incoming head of Central Command, said this month that about 80% of the fighters in the Syrian Democratic Forces were Kurdish. The U.S. backing for a heavily Kurdish armed force has been a point of tension with the Turkish government, which has a long history of crushing Kurdish rebellions and doesn't want to see Kurdish units control more of its southern border.

The CIA, meanwhile, has its own operations center inside Turkey from which it has been directing aid to rebel groups in Syria, providing them with TOW antitank missiles from Saudi Arabian weapons stockpiles.

While the Pentagon's actions are part of an overt effort by the U.S. and its allies against Islamic State, the CIA's backing of militias is part of a separate covert U.S. effort aimed at keeping pressure on the Assad government in hopes of prodding the Syrian leader to the negotiating table.



At first, the two different sets of fighters were primarily operating in widely separated areas of Syria — the Pentagon-backed Syrian Democratic Forces in the northeastern part of the country and the CIA-backed groups farther west. But over the last several months, Russian airstrikes against anti-Assad fighters in northwestern Syria have weakened them. That created an opening which allowed the Kurdish-led groups to expand their zone of control to the outskirts of Aleppo, bringing them into more frequent conflict with the CIA-backed outfits.

“Fighting over territory in Aleppo demonstrates how difficult it is for the U.S. to manage these really localized and in some cases entrenched conflicts,” said Nicholas A. Heras, an expert on the Syrian civil war at the Center for a New American Security, a think tank in Washington. “Preventing clashes is one of the constant topics in the joint operations room with Turkey.”

Over the course of the Syrian civil war, the town of Marea has been on the front line of Islamic State's attempts to advance across Aleppo province toward the rest of northern Syria.

On Feb. 18, the Syrian Democratic Forces attacked the town. A fighter with the Suqour Al-Jabal brigade, a group with links to the CIA, said intelligence officers of the U.S.-led coalition fighting Islamic State know their group has clashed with the Pentagon-trained militias.

“The MOM knows we fight them,” he said, referring to the joint operations center in southern Turkey, using an abbreviation for its name in Turkish, Musterek Operasyon Merkezi. “We'll fight all who aim to divide Syria or harm its people.” The fighter spoke on condition of anonymity.

Marea is home to many of the original Islamist fighters who took up arms against Assad during the [Arab Spring](#) in 2011. It has long been a crucial way station for supplies and fighters coming from Turkey into Aleppo.

“Attempts by Syrian Democratic Forces to take Marea was a great betrayal and was viewed as a further example of a Kurdish conspiracy to force them from Arab and Turkmen lands,” Heras said. The clashes brought the U.S. and Turkish officials to “loggerheads,” he added. After diplomatic pressure from the U.S., the militia withdrew to the outskirts of the town as a sign of good faith, he said. But continued fighting among different U.S.-backed groups may be inevitable, experts on the region said.

“Once they cross the border into Syria, you lose a substantial amount of control or ability to control their actions,” Jeffrey White, a former Defense Intelligence Agency official, said in a telephone interview. “You certainly have the potential for it becoming a larger problem as people fight for territory and control of the northern border area in Aleppo.”

The Levant Front: Can Aleppo’s Rebels Unite?

December 26, 2014, Carnegie Middle East Center

<http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/57605?lang=en>

On Christmas Day, the largest Sunni Islamist rebel groups in Syria’s Aleppo Governorate—except al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State—[announced](#) that [they have united](#) under a [joint command](#). The new rebel coalition is called *al-Jabha al-Shamiya*, Arabic for the Levant Front (or, if you prefer: “the

[Shamiya Front](#)”). Its creation follows months of negotiations held in Turkey and northern Syria between the five member factions, representing a broad array of rebel forces.

Members of the Levant Front

- **The Islamic Front in Aleppo:** Probably the most powerful of the five, the Islamic Front’s Aleppo wing is dominated by the [Tawhid Brigade](#), which has links both to the Muslim Brotherhood and to Salafi Islamism and has enjoyed excellent relations with Qatar and Turkey. In November 2013, the Tawhid Brigade co-created a nation-wide alliance known as the [Islamic Front](#) together with six other rebel factions, including the hawkish [Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement](#). In July 2014, the leaders of the Islamic Front [opted to merge their subunits in the Aleppo region](#). While differences certainly persisted under the surface, this meant that the Tawhid Brigade, Ahrar al-Sham, and all other member groups stopped using their separate names and logotypes and agreed to work simply as “the Islamic Front.” (In Aleppo only—in other regions of Syria, they retained their separate identities.) The Tawhid Brigade’s leader Abdelaziz Salamah, also known as “Abu Jumaa” and “Hajji Anadan,” was elected joint commander of the unified Islamic Front structure in Aleppo. This Islamist merchant from Anadan has been the political leader of the Tawhid Brigade since its creation in the summer of 2012, although he was overshadowed by his charismatic military deputy [Abdelqader Saleh](#) until Saleh’s death in November 2013 (just before the creation of the Islamic Front). Reflecting the strength of the Tawhid Brigade and its Islamic Front allies in Aleppo, Salamah will now become the overall leader of the Levant Front.
- **The Mujahideen Army:** [Created almost exactly a year ago](#) to combat the [ultra-extremist jihadi group known as the Islamic State](#), the [Mujahideen Army](#) began to fall apart again soon after it (and other groups) succeeded in pushing the Islamic State out of their area of operations. What’s left is dominated by a subfaction called the Ansar Brigade and its local allies within the so-called 19th Division of the Free Syrian Army. The leader of the Ansar Brigade and the 19th Division, a defected lieutenant-colonel by the name of Mohammed Bakkour (also known as Abu Bakr), is the head of Mujahideen Army. He will now become the military chief of the Levant Front.
- **The Nouredine al-Zengi Brigades:** The Nouredine al-Zengi Brigades were created in late 2011. Since then, they’ve passed through almost every alliance active in the Aleppo Governorate, including the Tawhid Brigade, the Asala wa-Tanmiya Front, and the Mujahideen Army. They are led by Sheikh Tawfiq Shahabuddin, a religious figure who now runs his own rebel fiefdom in the western Aleppo countryside.
- **The Fastaqim Kama Umirta Gathering:** Led by Mustafa Berro (alias Saqr Abu Quteiba) and created by a merger of several smaller Aleppo-based factions in December 2012, the Fastaqim Kama Umirta Gathering takes its name from [a Quranic verse](#) and contains several subfactions including the Peace Brigade, the Aleppo City Brigade, and the Aleppo al-Shahba Brigade. Like the Nouredine al-Zengi Brigades, the Fastaqim Kama Umirta Gathering was previously part of the Mujahideen Army but [left it only a couple of weeks ago](#), apparently in preparation for the announcement of the Levant Front.
- **The Asala wa-Tanmiya Front:** Just like the Islamic Front, the Asala wa-Tanmiya Front has affiliate groups elsewhere in Syria that won’t be affected by the Levant Front’s Aleppo-only

merger. The front is led by Secretary-General Khaled al-Hamad, a Salafi preacher based in the Gulf, and it is composed of a mixture of military defectors, civilian rebels, and Islamists. On the leadership level, the group is seen as close to the so-called madkhaliya, which is a conservative but politically pliant Salafi tendency that supports the Saudi government and opposes any Islamist group that would challenge it (including jihadis like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, but also reformist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood). In the Levant Front unification treaty, the Asala wa-Tanmiya Front was represented by Ibrahim Majbour, a career soldier from Idlib who was [one of the very first Syrian military defectors](#) in 2011.

What Does the Levant Front Represent?

The Levant Front's five member factions are themselves made up of a bewildering mass of smaller subfactions, whose ideological and political connections vary. It represents a spectrum of ideologies, ranging from the hardline Salafism that can be found among Ahrar al-Sham loyalists in the Islamic Front, across Muslim Brotherhood and other mainstream Sunni Islamist tendencies, to more or less apolitical factions linked to the Western- and Gulf-backed exile structure that is loosely referred to as the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Most of these groups seem to receive support directly or indirectly from the Turkey-based Military Operations Center (MOC), a multinational support structure that is staffed by the United States and other nations. Others are separately funded by state or private sponsors outside of the MOC structure.

The Levant Front has not published a political program, although its leading groups favor some sort of Sunni Islamic rule in Syria. However, the symbols chosen to represent the new Levant Front draws on the Syrian independence flag favored by the mainstream opposition and the FSA, despite the fact that some of the Levant Front's more hardline Islamist members—such as the Islamic Front factions—tend to view it as overly associated with un-Islamic nationalism and pro-democratic forces. The independence flag is also shunned by the [Nusra Front](#), an al-Qaeda franchise active in some areas of the Aleppo Governorate, which recently [clashed with Western- and Saudi-backed rebels](#); the Nusra Front was apparently not invited to join the Levant Front.

Relations to Other Rebel Coalitions

The Levant Front member factions are all part of a recently created Aleppo Operations Room, a joint headquarters for armed factions that also includes strongly Western-linked FSA factions like the [Hazm Movement](#). The Aleppo Operations Room is presided over by Mulhem al-Ageidi, a commander within the Fastaqim Kama Umirta Gathering.

In addition, all of the member factions in the Levant Front are members of the [Revolutionary Command Council](#) (RCC), created in late November. The Fastaqim Kama Umirta Gathering commander, [Abu Outeiba](#), says he personally visited the RCC President Qais al-Sheikh to inform him of the unification project. The Levant Front's creation was also publicly blessed by [Abdelmoneim Zeineddine](#), an Islamist figure who—along with Hassan al-Dugheim, Yassin Alloush, and other activists in the so-called Waetasemo Initiative—took the first steps to create the RCC in summer 2014.

Dangerous Times Ahead

The Levant Front is created at a dangerous time for the Aleppo rebels. President Bashar al-Assad's Syrian Arab Army forces have recently moved into the Handarat area north of Aleppo and they are now within striking distance of Castello Road, the last remaining exit from the opposition-held eastern part of

Aleppo City. If the regime manages to [encircle Aleppo](#), tens of thousands of civilians and some of Syria's largest rebel formations will be cut off and may be exposed to a [starvation siege](#) like the one that defeated their [allies in Homs](#) this spring. Meanwhile, the Islamic State jihadis based just east of Aleppo are studiously ignoring Assad's chokehold on the city. They're instead slowly pushing toward soft targets like Marea and other towns in the northern Aleppo countryside, threatening not only rebel supply lines but also the home areas of many powerful brigades inside Aleppo.

The situation is further complicated by a rush of sudden international attention to Aleppo. The UN's new Syria envoy, Staffan de Mistura, has recently launched the idea of a "freeze" in Aleppo, hoping to get both the government and the mainstream rebel forces to sign on to a local ceasefire. The UN envoy recently traveled to Turkey to meet with the RCC President Qais al-Sheikh and other rebel representatives in the region, having previously visited Damascus.

The founders of the Levant Front may well have had the upcoming "freeze" negotiations in mind when creating their new coalition—and if they can keep the regime from encircling the city, some of them may prefer to scuttle the ceasefire altogether. For example, Abu Quteiba, the commander of the Fastaqim Kama Umirta Gathering, warns in an interview with the pro-rebel news site [Zaman al-Wasl](#) that Mistura's "freeze" initiative will only serve the regime.

Whatever strategic choices they make, Syria's bitterly divided rebels will need all the unity they can get to deal with all of these simultaneous challenges. The Levant Front may be a step in the direction of such unity—but declaring its existence is one thing and making it work is another.