A Special Relationship-*The United States is teaming up with Al Qaeda, again*

By Andrew Cockburn

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One morning early in 1988, Ed McWilliams, a foreign-service officer posted to the American Embassy in Kabul, heard the thump of a massive explosion from somewhere on the other side of the city. It was more than eight years after the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, and the embassy was a tiny enclave with only a handful of diplomats. McWilliams, a former Army intelligence operative, had made it his business to venture as much as possible into the Soviet-occupied capital. Now he set out to see what had happened.

It was obviously something big: although the explosion had taken place on the other side of Sher Darwaza, a mountain in the center of Kabul, McWilliams had heard it clearly. After negotiating a maze of narrow streets on the south side of the city, he found the site. A massive car bomb, designed to kill as many civilians as possible, had been detonated in a neighborhood full of Hazaras, a much-persecuted minority.

Afghan mujahedeen move toward the front line during the battle for Jalalabad, Afghanistan, March 1989 © Robert Nickelsberg

McWilliams took pictures of the devastation, headed back to the embassy, and sent a report to Washington. It was very badly received — not because someone had launched a terrorist attack against Afghan civilians, but because McWilliams had reported it. The bomb, it turned out, had been the work of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the mujahedeen commander who received more CIA money and support than any other leader of the Afghan rebellion. The attack, the first of many, was part of a CIA-blessed scheme to "put pressure" on the Soviet presence in Kabul. Informing the Washington bureaucracy that Hekmatyar's explosives were being deployed to kill civilians was therefore entirely unwelcome.

"Those were Gulbuddin's bombs," McWilliams, a Rhode Islander with a gift for laconic understatement, told me

recently. “He was supposed to get the credit for this.” In the meantime, the former diplomat recalled, the CIA pressured him to “report a little less specifically about the humanitarian consequences of those vehicle bombs.”

I tracked down McWilliams, now retired to the remote mountains of southern New Mexico, because the extremist Islamist groups currently operating in Syria and Iraq called to mind the extremist Islamist groups whom we lavishly supported in Afghanistan during the 1980s. Hekmatyar, with his documented fondness for throwing acid in women’s faces, would have had nothing to learn from Al Qaeda. When a courageous ABC News team led by my wife, Leslie Cockburn, interviewed him in 1993, he had beheaded half a dozen people earlier that day. Later, he killed their translator.

In the wake of 9/11, the story of U.S. support for militant Islamists against the Soviets became something of a touchy subject. Former CIA and intelligence officials like to suggest that the agency simply played the roles of financier and quartermaster. In this version of events, the dirty work — the actual management of the campaign and the dealings with rebel groups — was left to Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). It was Pakistan’s fault that at least 70 percent of total U.S. aid went to the fundamentalists, even if the CIA demanded audited accounts on a regular basis.

The beneficiaries, however, have not always been content to play along with the official story. Asked by the ABC News team whether he remembered Charlie Wilson, the Texas congressman later immortalized in print and onscreen as the patron saint of the mujahedeen, Hekmatyar fondly recalled that “he was a good friend. He was all the time supporting our jihad.” Others expressed the same point in a different way.

Abdul Haq, a mujahedeen commander who might today be described as a “moderate rebel,” complained loudly during and after the Soviet war in Afghanistan about American policy. The CIA “would come with a big load of ammunition and money and supplies to these [fundamentalist] groups. We would tell them, ‘What the hell is going on? You are creating a monster in this country.’ ”

Fighters with Jabhat al-Nusra search residents at a checkpoint in Aleppo, Syria, October 2013 © Molhem Barakat/Reuters

American veterans of the operation, at the time the largest in CIA history, have mostly stuck to the mantra that it was a Pakistani show. Only occasionally have officials let slip that the support for fundamentalists was a matter of cold-blooded calculation. Robert Oakley, a leading player in the Afghan effort as ambassador to Pakistan from 1988 to 1991, later remarked, “If you mix Islam with politics, you have a much

more potent explosive brew, and that was quite successful in getting the Soviets out of Afghanistan."

In fact, the CIA had been backing Afghan Islamists well before the Russians invaded the country in December 1979. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jimmy Carter's national-security adviser, later boasted to *Le Nouvel Observateur* that the president had "signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul" six months*prior* to the invasion. "And that very day," Brzezinski recalled, "I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention." The war that inevitably followed killed a million Afghans.

Other presumptions proved to be less accurate, including a misplaced faith in the martial prowess of our fundamentalist clients. As it turned out, the Islamists were really not the ferocious anti-Soviet warriors their backers claimed them to be. McWilliams, who left Kabul in 1988 to become special envoy to the Afghan rebels, recalled that Hekmatyar was more interested in using his U.S.-supplied arsenal on rival warlords. (On occasion, he tortured them as well — another fact the envoy was "discouraged" from reporting.) "Hekmatyar was a great fighter," McWilliams remembered, "but not necessarily with the Soviets."

Even after the Russians left, in February 1989, the agency's favorite Afghan showed himself incapable of toppling the Soviet-supported regime of Mohammad Najibullah. Hekmatyar's attack on the key city of Jalalabad, for example, was an embarrassing failure. "Oakley bragged in the weeks leading up to this offensive [that] it was going to be a great success," said McWilliams, who had passed on warnings from Abdul Haq and others that the plan was foolhardy, only to be

told, “We got this locked up.” To his disgust, the Pakistani and American intelligence officials overseeing the operation swelled its ranks with youthful cannon fodder. “What they wound up doing was emptying the refugee camps,” McWilliams told me. “It was a last-ditch effort to throw these sixteen-year-old boys into the fight in order to keep this thing going. It did not work.” Thousands died.

Anxious as they might have been to obscure the true nature of their relationship with unappealing Afghans like Hekmatyar, U.S. officials were even more careful when it came to the Arab fundamentalists who flocked to the war in Afghanistan and later embarked on global jihad as Al Qaeda. No one could deny that they had been there, but their possible connection to the CIA became an increasingly delicate subject as Al Qaeda made its presence felt in the 1990s. The official line — that the United States had kept its distance from the Arab mujahedeen — was best expressed by Robert Gates, who became director of the CIA in 1991. When the agency first learned of the jihadi recruits pouring into Afghanistan from across the Arab world, he later wrote, “We examined ways to increase their participation, perhaps in the form of some sort of ‘international brigade,’ but nothing came of it.”

The reality was otherwise. The United States was intimately involved in the enlistment of these volunteers — indeed, many of them were signed up through a network of recruiting offices in this country. The guiding light in this effort was a charismatic Palestinian cleric, Abdullah Azzam, who founded Maktab al-Khidamat (MAK), also known as the Afghan Services Bureau, in 1984, to raise money and recruits for jihad. He was assisted by a wealthy young Saudi, Osama bin Laden. The headquarters for the U.S. arm of the operation was in Brooklyn, at the Al-Kifah Refugee Center on Atlantic Avenue,

which Azzam invariably visited when touring mosques and universities across the country.

“You have to put it in context,” argued Ali Soufan, a former FBI agent and counterterrorism expert who has done much to expose the CIA’s post-9/11 torture program. “Throughout most of the 1980s, the jihad in Afghanistan was something supported by this country. The recruitment among Muslims here in America was in the open. Azzam officially visited the United States, and he went from mosque to mosque — they recruited many people to fight in Afghanistan under that banner.”

The view through the scope of a weapon that belongs to a member of Ahrar al-Sham, Idlib, Syria, March 2015 © Khalil Ashawi/Reuters

American involvement with Azzam’s organization went well beyond laissez-faire indulgence. “We encouraged the recruitment of not only Saudis but Palestinians and Lebanese

and a great variety of combatants, who would basically go to Afghanistan to perform jihad," McWilliams insisted. "This was part of the CIA plan. This was part of the game."

The Saudis, of course, had been an integral part of the anti-Soviet campaign from the beginning. According to one former CIA official closely involved in the Afghanistan operation, Saudi Arabia supplied 40 percent of the budget for the rebels. The official said that William Casey, who ran the CIA under Ronald Reagan, "would fly to Riyadh every year for what he called his 'annual hajj' to ask for the money. Eventually, after a lot of talk, the king would say okay, but then we would have to sit and listen politely to all their incredibly stupid ideas about how to fight the war."

Despite such comments, it would seem that the U.S. and Saudi strategies did not differ all that much, especially when it came to routing money to the most extreme fundamentalist factions. Fighting the Soviets was only part of the ultimate goal. The Egyptian preacher Abu Hamza, now serving a life sentence on terrorism charges, visited Saudi Arabia in 1986, and later recalled the constant public injunctions to join the jihad: "You have to go, you have to join, leave your schools, leave your family." The whole Afghanistan enterprise, he explained, "was meant to actually divert people from the problems in their own country." It was "like a pressure-cooker vent. If you keep [the cooker] all sealed up, it will blow up in your face, so you have to design a vent, and this Afghan jihad was the vent."

Soufan agreed with this analysis. "I think it's not fair to only blame the CIA," he told me. "Egypt was happy to get rid of a lot of these guys and have them go to Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia was very happy to do that, too." As he pointed out, Islamic fundamentalists were already striking these regimes at home: in November 1979, for example, Wahhabi extremists

had stormed the Grand Mosque in Mecca. The subsequent siege left hundreds dead.

Within a few short years, however, the sponsoring governments began to recognize a flaw in the scheme: the vent was two-way. I heard this point most vividly expressed in 1994, at a dinner party on a yacht cruising down the Nile. The wealthy host had deemed it safer to be waterborne owing to a vigorous terror campaign by Egyptian jihadists. At the party, this defensive tactic elicited a vehement comment from Osama El-Baz, a senior security adviser to Hosni Mubarak. “It’s all the fault of those stupid bastards at the CIA,” he said, as the lights of Cairo drifted by. “They trained these people, kept them in being after the Russians left, and now we get this.”

According to El-Baz, MAK had been maintained after the Afghan conflict for future deployment against Iran. Its funding, he insisted, came from the Saudis and the CIA. A portion of that money had been parked at the Al-Kifah office in Brooklyn, under the supervision of one of Azzam’s acolytes — until the custodian was himself murdered, possibly by adherents of a rival jihadi. (Soufan confirmed the murder story, stating that the sum in question was about $100,000.)*

> * *Azzam was assassinated in 1989 in Peshawar, Pakistan, by a sophisticated car bomb. Though there was a wide range of credible suspects, his widow was convinced that the CIA had commissioned the killing.*

A year before my conversation with El-Baz, in fact, the United States had already been confronted with the two-way vent. In 1993, a bomb in the basement of one of the World Trade Center towers killed six people. (The bombers had hoped to bring down both structures and kill many thousands.) A leading

member of the plot was Mahmud Abouhalima, an Afghanistan veteran who had worked for years at the recruiting center in Brooklyn. Another of Azzam's disciples, however, proved to be a much bigger problem: Osama bin Laden, who now commanded the loyalty of the Arab mujahedeen recruited by his mentor.

In 1996, the CIA set up a special unit to track down bin Laden, led by the counterterrorism expert Michael Scheuer. Now settled in Afghanistan, the Al Qaeda chief had at least theoretically fallen out with the Saudi regime that once supported him and other anti-Soviet jihadis. Nevertheless, bin Laden seemed to have maintained links with his homeland — and some in the CIA were sensitive to that fact. When I interviewed Scheuer in 2014 for my book *Kill Chain*, he told me that one of his first requests to the Saudis was for routine information about his quarry: birth certificate, financial records, and so forth. There was no response. Repeated requests produced nothing. Ultimately, a message arrived from the CIA station chief in Riyadh, John Brennan, who ordered the requests to stop — they were "upsetting the Saudis."

Five years later, Al Qaeda, employing a largely Saudi suicide squad, destroyed the World Trade Center. In a sane world, this disaster might have permanently ended Washington's long-standing taste for mixing Islam with politics. But old habits die hard.

In the spring and summer of last year, a coalition of Syrian rebel groups calling itself Jaish al-Fatah — the Army of Conquest — swept through the northwestern province of Idlib, posing a serious threat to the Assad regime. Leading the charge was Al Qaeda's Syrian branch, known locally as Jabhat al-Nusra (the Nusra Front). The other major component of the coalition was

Ahrar al-Sham, a group that had formed early in the anti-Assad uprising and looked for inspiration to none other than Abdullah Azzam. Following the victory, Nusra massacred twenty members of the Druze faith, considered heretical by fundamentalists, and forced the remaining Druze to convert to Sunni Islam. (The Christian population of the area had wisely fled.) Ahrar al-Sham meanwhile posted videos of the public floggings it administered to those caught skipping Friday prayers.

This potent alliance of jihadi militias had been formed under the auspices of the rebellion's major backers: Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar. But it also enjoyed the endorsement of two other major players. At the beginning of the year, Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri had ordered his followers to cooperate with other groups. In March, according to several sources, a U.S.-Turkish-Saudi "coordination room" in southern Turkey had also ordered the rebel groups it was supplying to cooperate with Jaish al-Fatah. The groups, in other words, would be embedded within the Al Qaeda coalition.

A few months before the Idlib offensive, a member of one CIA-backed group had explained the true nature of its relationship to the Al Qaeda franchise. Nusra, he told the *New York Times*, allowed militias vetted by the United States to appear independent, so that they would continue to receive American supplies. When I asked a former White House official involved in Syria policy if this was not a de facto alliance, he put it this way: "I would not say that Al Qaeda is our ally, but a turnover of weapons is probably unavoidable. I'm fatalistic about that. It's going to happen."

Earlier in the Syrian war, U.S. officials had at least maintained the pretense that weapons were being funneled only to so-called

moderate opposition groups. But in 2014, in a speech at Harvard, Vice President Joe Biden confirmed that we were arming extremists once again, although he was careful to pin the blame on America's allies in the region, whom he denounced as "our largest problem in Syria." In response to a student's question, he volunteered that our allies

were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens, *thousands* of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad. Except that the people who were being supplied were al-Nusra and Al Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world.

Biden's explanation was entirely reminiscent of official excuses for the arming of fundamentalists in Afghanistan during the 1980s, which maintained that the Pakistanis had total control of the distribution of U.S.-supplied weapons and that the CIA was incapable of intervening when most of those weapons ended up with the likes of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Asked why the United States of America was supposedly powerless to stop nations like Qatar, population 2.19 million, from pouring arms into the arsenals of Nusra and similar groups, a former adviser to one of the Gulf States replied softly: "They didn't want to."

The Syrian war, which has to date killed upwards of 200,000 people, grew out of peaceful protests in March 2011, a time when similar movements were sweeping other Arab countries. For the Obama Administration, the tumultuous upsurge was welcome. It appeared to represent the final defeat of Al Qaeda and radical jihadism, a view duly reflected in a *New York Times* headline from that February: AS REGIMES FALL IN ARAB

WORLD, AL QAEDA SEES HISTORY FLY BY. The president viewed the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 as his crowning victory. Peter Bergen, CNN's terrorism pundit, concurred, certifying the Arab Spring and the death of bin Laden as the "final bookends" of the global war on terror.

Al Qaeda, on the other hand, had a different interpretation of the Arab Spring, hailing it as entirely positive for the jihadist cause. Far from obsessing about his own safety, as Obama had suggested, Zawahiri was brimful of optimism. The "tyrants" supported by the United States, he crowed from his unknown headquarters, were seeing their thrones crumble at the same time as "their master" was being defeated. "The Islamic project," declared Hamid bin Abdullah al-Ali, a Kuwait-based Al Qaeda fund-raiser, would be "the greatest beneficiary from the environment of freedom."

While the revolutions were ongoing, the Obama Administration settled on "moderate Islam" as the most suitable political option for the emerging Arab democracies — and concluded that the Muslim Brotherhood fitted the bill. This venerable Islamist organization had originally been fostered by the British as a means of countering leftist and nationalist movements in the empire. As British power waned, others, including the CIA and the Saudis, were happy to sponsor the group for the same purpose, unmindful of its long-term agenda. (The Saudis, however, always took care to prevent it from operating within their kingdom.)

The Brotherhood was in fact the ideological ancestor of the most violent Islamist movements of the modern era. Sayyid Qutb, the organization's moving spirit until he was hanged in Egypt in 1966, served as an inspiration to the young Zawahiri as he embarked on his career in terrorism. Extremists have

followed Qutb's lead in calling for a resurrected caliphate across the Muslim world, along with a return to the premodern customs prescribed by the Prophet.

None of which stopped the Obama Administration from viewing the Brotherhood as a relatively benign purveyor of moderate Islam, not so different from the type on display in Turkey, where the Brotherhood-linked AKP party had presided over what seemed to be a flourishing democracy and a buoyant economy, even if the country's secular tradition was being rolled back. As Mubarak's autocracy crumbled in Egypt, American officials actively promoted the local Brotherhood; the U.S. ambassador, Anne Patterson, reportedly held regular meetings with the group's leadership. "The administration was motivated to show that the U.S. would deal with Islamists," the former White House official told me, "even though the downside of the Brotherhood was pretty well understood."

At the same time that it was being cautiously courted by the United States, the Brotherhood enjoyed a firm bond with the stupendously rich ruling clique in Qatar. The tiny country was ever eager to assert its independence in a neighborhood dominated by Saudi Arabia and Iran. While hosting the American military at the vast Al Udeid Air Base outside Doha, the Qataris put decisive financial weight behind what they viewed as the coming force in Arab politics. They were certain, the former White House official told me, "that the future really lay in the hands of the Islamists," and saw themselves "on the right side of history."

The Syrian opposition seemed like an ideal candidate for such assistance, especially since Assad had been in the U.S. crosshairs for some time. (The country's first and only democratically elected government was overthrown by a CIA-instigated coup in 1949 at the behest of American oil interests

irked at Syria's request for better terms on a pipeline deal.) In December 2006, William Roebuck, the political counselor at the American Embassy in Damascus, sent a classified cable to Washington, later released by WikiLeaks, proposing "actions, statements, and signals" that could help destabilize Assad's regime. Among other recommended initiatives was a campaign, coordinated with the Egyptian and Saudi governments, to pump up existing alarm among Syrian Sunnis about Iranian influence in the country.

Roebuck could count on a receptive audience. A month earlier, Condoleezza Rice, the secretary of state, testified on Capitol Hill that there was a "new strategic alignment" in the Middle East, separating "extremists" (Iran and Syria) and "reformers" (Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states). Undergirding these diplomatic euphemisms was something more fundamental. Prince Bandar bin Sultan, who returned to Riyadh in 2005 after many years as Saudi ambassador in Washington, had put it bluntly in an earlier conversation with Richard Dearlove, the longtime head of Britain's MI6. "The time is not far off in the Middle East," Bandar said, "when it will be literally *God help the Shia.* More than a billion Sunnis have simply had enough." The implications were clear. Bandar was talking about destroying the Shiite states of Iran and Iraq, as well as the Alawite (which is to say, Shia-derived) leadership in Syria.

Yet the Saudi rulers were acutely aware of their exposure to reverse-vent syndrome. Their corruption and other irreligious practices repelled the jihadis, who had more than once declared their eagerness to clean house back home. Such fears were obvious to Dearlove when he visited Riyadh with Tony Blair soon after 9/11. As he later recalled, the head of Saudi intelligence shouted at him that the recent attacks in Manhattan and Washington were a "mere pinprick" compared with the

havoc the extremists planned to unleash in their own region: “What these terrorists want is to destroy the House of Saud and to remake the Middle East!”

From these statements, Dearlove discerned two powerful (and complementary) impulses in the thinking of the Saudi leadership. First, there could be “no legitimate or admissible challenge to the Islamic purity of their Wahhabi credentials as guardians of Islam’s holiest shrines.” (Their record on head-chopping and the oppression of women was, after all, second to none.) In addition, they were “deeply attracted toward any militancy which can effectively challenge Shia-dom.” Responding to both impulses, Saudi Arabia would reopen the vent. This time, however, the jihad would no longer be against godless Communists but against fellow Muslims, in Syria.

By the beginning of 2012, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and the United States were all heavily involved in supporting the armed rebellion against Assad. In theory, American support for the Free Syrian Army was limited to “nonlethal supplies” from both the State Department and the CIA. Qatar, which had successfully packed the opposition Syrian National Council with members of the Muslim Brotherhood, operated under no such restrictions. A stream of loaded Qatari transport planes took off from Al Udeid and headed to Turkey, whence their lethal cargo was moved into Syria.

“The Qataris were not at all discriminating in who they gave arms to,” the former White House official told me. “They were just dumping stuff to lucky recipients.” Chief among the lucky ones were Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, both of which had benefited from a rebranding strategy instituted by Osama bin Laden. The year before he was killed, bin Laden had complained about the damage that offshoots such as Al Qaeda

in Iraq, with its taste for beheadings and similar atrocities, had done to his organization's image. He directed his media staff to prepare a new strategy that would avoid "everything that would have a negative impact on the perception" of Al Qaeda. Among the rebranding proposals discussed at his Abbottabad compound was the simple expedient of changing the organization's name. This strategy was gradually implemented for the group's newer offshoots, allowing Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham to present themselves to the credulous as kinder, gentler Islamists.

The rebranding program was paradoxically assisted by the rise of the Islamic State, a group that had split off from the Al Qaeda organization partly in disagreement over the image-softening exercise enjoined by Zawahiri. Although the Islamic State attracted many defectors and gained territory at the expense of its former Nusra partners, its assiduously cultivated reputation for extreme cruelty made the other groups look humane by comparison. (According to Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, a senior fellow with the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, many Nusra members suspect that the Islamic State was created by the Americans "to discredit jihad.")

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, driven principally by its virulent enmity toward Iran, Assad's main supporter, was eager to throw its weight behind the anti-Assad crusade. By December 2012, the CIA was arranging for large quantities of weapons, paid for by the Saudis, to move from Croatia to Jordan to Syria.

"The Saudis preferred to work through us," explained the former White House official. "They didn't have an autonomous capability to find weapons. We were the intermediaries, with some control over the distribution. There was an implicit illusion on the part of the U.S. that Saudi weapons were going

to groups with some potential for a pro-Western attitude." This was a curious illusion to entertain, given Saudi Arabia's grim culture of Wahhabi austerity as well as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's flat declaration, in a classified cable from 2009, that "donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide."

Some in intelligence circles suspect that such funding is ongoing. "How much Saudi and Qatari money — and I'm not suggesting direct government funding, but I am suggesting maybe a blind eye being turned — is being channeled towards ISIS and reaching it?" Dearlove asked in July 2014. "For ISIS to be able to surge into the Sunni areas of Iraq in the way that it's done recently has to be the consequence of substantial and sustained funding. Such things simply do not happen spontaneously." Those on the receiving end of Islamic State attacks tend to agree. Asked what could be done to help Iraq following the group's lightning assaults in the summer of 2014, an Iraqi diplomat replied: "Bomb Saudi Arabia."

However the money was flowing, the Saudis certainly ended up crafting their own Islamist coalition. "The Saudis never armed al-Nusra," recalled the Gulf State adviser. "They made the calculation that there's going to be an appetite for Islamist-leaning militias. So they formed a rival umbrella army called Jaish al-Islam. That was the Saudi alternative — still Islamist, but not Muslim Brotherhood."

Given that Jaish al-Islam ultimately answered to Prince Bandar, who became the head of Saudi intelligence in 2012, there did not appear to be a lot of room for Western values in the group's agenda. Its leader, Zahran Alloush, was the son of a Syrian religious scholar. He talked dutifully about the merits of tolerance to Western reporters, but would revert to such

politically incorrect themes as the mass expulsion of Alawites from Damascus when addressing his fellow jihadis. At the same time, Saudi youths have poured into Syria, ready to fight for any extremist group that would have them, even when those groups started fighting among themselves. Noting the huge numbers of young Saudis on the battle lines in Syria, a Saudi talk-show host lamented that “our children are fighting on both sides” — meaning Nusra and the Islamic State. “The Saudis,” he exclaimed, “are killing one another!”

The determination of Turkey (a NATO ally) and Qatar (the host of the biggest American base in the Middle East) to support extreme jihadi groups became starkly evident in late 2013. On December 6, armed fighters from Ahrar al-Sham and other militias raided warehouses at Bab al-Hawa, on the Turkish border, and seized supplies belonging to the Free Syrian Army. As it happened, a meeting of an international coordination group on Syria, the so-called London Eleven, was scheduled for the following week. Delegates from the United States, Europe, and the Middle East were bent on issuing a stern condemnation of the offending jihadi group.

The Turks and Qataris, however, adamantly refused to sign on. As one of the participants told me later, “All the countries in the room [understood] that Turkey’s opposition to listing Ahrar al-Sham was because they were providing support to them.” The Qatari representative insisted that it was counterproductive to condemn such groups as terrorist. If the other countries did so, he made clear, Qatar would stop cooperating on Syria. “Basically, they were saying that if you name terrorists, we’re going to pick up our ball and go home,” the source told me. The U.S. delegate said that the Islamic Front, an umbrella organization, would be welcome at the negotiating table — but Ahrar al-Sham, which happened to be its leading member,

would not. The diplomats mulled over their communiqué, traded concessions, adjusted language. The final version contained no condemnation, or even mention, of Ahrar al-Sham.

Two years later, Washington's capacity for denial in the face of inconvenient facts remains undiminished. Addressing the dominance of extremists in the Syrian opposition, Leon Panetta, a former CIA director, has blamed our earlier failure to arm those elusive moderates. The catastrophic consequences of this very approach in Libya are seldom mentioned. "If we had intervened more swiftly in Syria," Gartenstein-Ross says, "the best-case scenario probably would have been another Libya. Meaning that we would still be dealing with a collapsed state and spillover into other Middle Eastern states and Europe."

Even as we have continued our desultory bombing campaign against the Islamic State, Ahrar al-Sham and Nusra are creeping closer and closer to international respectability. A month after the London Eleven meeting, a group of scholars from the Brookings Institution published an op-ed making the case for Ahrar al-Sham: "Designating [the] group as a terrorist organization might backfire by pushing it completely into Al Qaeda's camp." (The think tank's recent receipt of a multiyear, $15 million grant from Qatar was doubtless coincidental.)

Over the past year, other distinguished figures have voiced support for a closer relationship with Al Qaeda's rebranded extensions. David Petraeus, another former head of the CIA, has argued for arming at least the "more moderate" parts of Nusra. Robert Ford, a former ambassador to Syria and a vociferous supporter of the rebel cause, called on America to "open channels for dialogue" with Ahrar al-Sham, even if its members had on occasion slaughtered some Alawites and

desecrated Christian sites. Even *Foreign Affairs*, an Establishment sounding board, has echoed these notions, suggesting that it was time for the United States to "rethink its policy toward al-Qaeda, particularly its targeting of Zawahiri."

"Let's be fair to the CIA," said Benazir Bhutto, the once and future prime minister of Pakistan, back in 1993, when the consequences of fostering jihad were already becoming painfully clear to its sponsors. "They never knew that these people that they were training to fight Soviets in Afghanistan were one day going to bite the hand that fed them."

Things are clearer on the ground. Not long ago, far away from the think tanks and briefing rooms where policies are formulated and spun, a small boy in the heart of Nusra territory was telling a filmmaker for Vice News about Osama bin Laden. "He terrified and fought the Americans," he said reverently. Beside him, his brother, an even smaller child, described his future: "To become a suicide fighter for the sake of God." A busload of older boys was asked which group they belonged to. "Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda," they responded cheerfully.