

WITH ONE BOMBING RUN RUSSIA GETS THE US TO ACKNOWLEDGE CIA'S "COVERT" REGIME CHANGE FORCES

For some time, a number of us have been tracking the collective forgetfulness about CIA's acknowledged covert forces on the ground in Syria. I often point back to the day two years ago when Chuck Hagel confirmed our covert efforts in Syria in a congressional hearing, as well as Senate Foreign Relations Committee member frustration with their inability to get details on the acknowledged covert ops (that already numbered in the thousands, according to Tom Udall) there. Jim and I have written a slew of other posts about CIA's covert forces there (one two three four five six seven are just a small sampling).

More recently, Adam Johnson caught NYT and Vox pretending CIA's efforts don't exist at all.

This past week, two pieces—one in the **New York Times** detailing the “finger pointing” over Obama’s “failed” Syria policy, and a **Vox** “explainer” of the Syrian civil war—did one better: They didn’t just omit the fact that the CIA has been arming, training and funding rebels since 2012, they heavily implied they had never done so.

To be fair, some intelligence reporters have done consistently good reporting on CIA's covert war in Syria. But the policy people – especially the ones reporting how if Obama had supported “moderate” rebels sooner – usually pretend no one knows that Obama did support Qatar and Saudi-vetted liver-eating rebels sooner and they often turned out to be Islamists.

The selective ignorance about CIA's covert operations in Syria seems to have been eliminated, however, with one Russian bombing run that targeted them.

Russia launched airstrikes in Syria on Wednesday, catching U.S. and Western officials off guard and drawing new condemnation as evidence suggested Moscow wasn't targeting extremist group Islamic State, but rather other opponents of Bashar al-Assad's regime.

One of the airstrikes hit an area primarily held by rebels backed by the Central Intelligence Agency and allied spy services, U.S. officials said, catapulting the Syrian crisis to a new level of danger and uncertainty. Moscow's entry means the world's most powerful militaries—including the U.S., Britain and France—now are flying uncoordinated combat missions, heightening the risk of conflict in the skies over Syria.

Thus far, of course, US officials are insisting that the anti-Assad troops Russia targeted are wholly distinct from ISIS (even while they remain silent about whether they're Islamic extremists).

Secretary of State John Kerry met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and said he raised U.S. concerns about attacks that target regime opponents other than Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL. In Syria's multi-sided war, Mr. Assad's military—aided by Iran and the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah—is fighting both Islamic State and opposition rebel groups, some of which are supported by the U.S. and its allies.

[snip]

The U.S. and its allies were angry at

the Russians on many scores: that they are supporting Mr. Assad; that they aren't coordinating their actions with the existing, U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition; that they provided terse notice only an hour before their operations; that they demanded the U.S. coalition stay out of Syrian airspace; and that they struck in areas where anti-Assad rebels—not Islamic State—operate.

"It does appear that they were in areas where there probably were not ISIL forces, and that is precisely one of the problems with this whole approach," said Mr. Carter, the U.S. defense chief.

This attempt to distinguish ISIS from the CIA-backed rebels will quickly lead to an awkward place for the Administration and its allies, not least because making any distinction will require providing details on the vetting process used to select these forces, as well as addressing the evidence of cooperation with ISIS or traditional al Qaeda in the past. Plus, the more the US argues these groups that *aren't* entirely distinct from al Qaeda *are* entirely distinct from ISIS, it will make the Administration's claim that the 2001 AUMF against Al Qaeda authorizes it to fight ISIS (in related news, DOJ just denied USAT's FOIA request for 3 OLC documents making that case) really wobbly. Any claim Russia makes that these anti-Assad forces are also Islamic extremists (and therefore entirely legitimate targets in the fight against ISIS) will be based on intelligence that is no more shitty than US intelligence that they're not, especially given that CentCom admits on the record it can't even trust (much less vet) the communications it is getting from rebels on the ground about *their* coordination with al Qaeda. It will devolve into a he-said-she-said about whose claims are more suspect, Assad's or the Saudis' who've been pushing for regime change long before the Arab

Spring gave then an opportunity to push it along.

And all the while, any pretense that CIA's involvement is covert will grow more and more laughable. Reporting like this – which claims Putin has “hijacked” Obama's war on ISIS when the content only makes sense if Putin has more urgently hijacked Obama's regime change efforts against Assad – will become more and more laughable.

Whatever Russia's entry does for the tactical confrontation (I have no hopes it will do anything but make this conflict even bloodier, and possibly expand it into other countries), it has clarified a discussion the US has always tried to obscure. There are plenty of US backed forces on the ground – which may or may not be Islamic extremists (see Pat Lang on this point) – whose priority is toppling Bashar al-Assad, not defeating ISIS. While there will be some interesting fights about who they really are in coming days (and whether CIA has already acknowledged that it inflamed Islamists with its regime change efforts), American priorities will become increasingly clear.

Make no mistake: I am not defending Russia, Syria, our vetted “moderate” rebels, Saudi Arabia, or anyone else. It's a volatile situation and none of the outside intervention seems to be helping. But one big reason we've been failing is because we've been lying publicly about the forces on the ground. Those lies just got a lot harder to sustain.

(As always on the Syrian quagmire, see Moon of Alabama's latest.)