

# **DAY SIX: OUR FIRST PURGE**

Rather than targeting Latinos and Muslims, Trump's first targets have been disloyal Republicans (and Mormon Harry Reid). That may help us keep a majority who are opposed to Trump together.

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## **FBI ESTABLISHED SAUDI TASK FORCE JUST BEFORE JOINT INQUIRY RELEASE**

The House Intelligence Committee just released the 28 pages detailing Saudi involvement in 9/11.

The pages are actually more damning than I expected. It lays out many damning details we already knew of: including that Bandar bin Sultan's wife was providing money to one of the suspect Saudi intelligence people, several Saudi apparent agents provided support for the hijackers, and an apparent dry run for the attack was conducted by someone paid by the Saudis.

One really damning detail that I didn't know, however (or had forgotten if covered in Bob Graham's book), is that it wasn't until the Joint Inquiry focused on the Saudis that FBI established task force to look into Saudi Arabia's role in the attack.

support, if it exists, is knowing or inadvertent in nature. The FBI's Washington Field Office created a squad devoted to [REDACTED]. Only recently, and at least in part due to the Joint Inquiry's focus on this issue, did the FBI and CIA establish a working group to address the Saudi issue. In the view of the Joint Inquiry, this gap in U.S. intelligence coverage is unacceptable, given the magnitude and immediacy of the potential risk to U.S. national security. The Intelligence Community needs to address this area of concern as aggressively and as quickly as possible.

That means over a year elapsed before the FBI really started investigating this angle. It goes on to reveal FBI was not focusing any counterintelligence resources on Saudis before 9/11, because "FBI received 'no reporting from any member of the Intelligence Community' that there was a [redacted] presence in the United States." A very heavily redacted passage implies that's because they were an "ally" [scare quotes original].

Prior to September 11<sup>th</sup>, the FBI apparently did not focus investigative [REDACTED] Saudi nationals in the United States due to Saudi Arabia's status as an American "ally". [REDACTED]

It goes on to note that CIA *did* have records of such ties (we knew that); it makes no mention of NSA, though they knew of Saudi ties as well.

The report even reveals that Robert Mueller learned about the Saudi role in the attack from the Joint Inquiry:

In the October 9, 2002 closed hearing, Director Mueller acknowledged that he became aware of some of the facts regarding the Saudi issue only as a result of the investigative work of the Joint Inquiry Staff:

I'm saying the sequence of events here, I think the staff probed and, as a result of the probing, some facts came to light here and to me, frankly, that had not come to light before, and perhaps would not have come to light had the staff not probed. That's what I'm telling you. So I'm agreeing with you that the staff probing brought out facts that may not have come to this Committee."

Senator Dewine: But what you're also saying, though, is that that probing then brought facts to your attention.

Director Mueller: Yes.

This is fairly unbelievable, but all too believable.

The end of the report provides multiple reports of Saudi refusal to cooperate in the investigation.

When a high-level [REDACTED] officer was asked how the September 11 attacks might have been prevented, he cited greater Saudi cooperation, pointing to an example from the summer of 2001, when the U.S. Government requested Saudi assistance, with no success. In May 2001, the U.S. Government became aware that an individual in Saudi Arabia was in contact with Abu Zubaida and was most likely aware of an upcoming al-Qa'ida operation. The U.S. Government pressured the Saudi Government to locate him. The Saudis informed the U.S. Government that they required additional information to do so. The U.S. Government agency that had originally learned of this individual's knowledge refused to provide the Saudis with additional information because it would reveal sources and methods. The National Security Council also tried to pressure the Saudis, but the Saudis would not cooperate without the additional information.

I'm particularly interested in the detail that they demanded information that would show sources and methods. I know that the Saudis had notice of Stellar Wind well before it got exposed in 2005. That means they were getting tips on what we knew even as refusing to tell what they knew.

Between that and the failure to investigate, it explains how the Saudis could get away with assisting an attack on the US.

Update: Kristin Breitweiser rightly rails on mainstream coverage of the report that dismiss the seriousness of the allegations in the report.

When CIA Director John Brennan states that he believes the 29 pages prove that the government of Saudi Arabia had no involvement in the 9/11 attacks, recognize that John Brennan is not a man living in reality – he is delusional by design, feeding and protecting his Saudi vice.

When Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Anne W. Patterson, testifies – under oath – that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an ally that does everything they can to help us fight against Islamic terrorism, recognize that her deep, steep Saudi pandering serves and protects only her Saudi vice.

Read the 29 pages and know the facts.

Do not let any person in our government deny the damning reality of the 29

pages.

And as you read the 29 pages remember that they were written during 2002 and 2003.

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## THE 28 PAGES

On Sunday, President Obama said this about about Hillary's email scandal: "There's classified & then there's classified."

Perhaps that's what has led him to decide, after 15 years, the 28 pages on the Saudis' role in 9/11 can finally be released (or at least reviewed for declassification; given the way the 60 Minutes script ignored evidence about Bandar bin Sultan, I suspect they'll still protect him).

The ostensible precipitating factor was a 60 Minutes show that, as I understand, didn't expose anything we haven't known for a decade (for comparison see this declaration Bob Graham submitted last year in a suit against the Saudis). But given the way 60 Minutes have become a house organ for the Intelligence Community, and given the way Nancy Pelosi had a statement (emphasizing her long role in Intelligence oversight, such as it exists) endorsing the disclosure all ready to go,

"As the former Ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee and top the House Democrat on the Joint Congressional investigation looking into the 9/11 attacks, I agree with former Senator Bob Graham that these documents should be declassified and made public, and that the Bush Administration's refusal to do so was a mistake," Pelosi said in a statement. "I have always advocated for providing as much

transparency as possible to the American people consistent with protecting our national security.”

I gotta believe this was all orchestrated.

After pretending the Saudis have been good faith partners for 15 years, in spite of abundant evidence evidence they have always continued to support terrorism as a tool in their bid for power, it seems, the Intelligence Committee has finally decided it was convenient to be able to discuss the Saudi role in 9/11.

Mind you, if the IC was really serious about discussing what bad partners the Saudis have always been, they should also declassify the other abundant evidence that the Saudis have been playing two sides with us.

But that would discomfort a good many Americans, I suspect.

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## AMERICA'S FAILED QUAGMIRE

The WaPo has a report providing new (actually conflicting, especially as to start date) details on America's "covert" efforts in Syria.

In all seriousness, Administration officials (some anonymous) and a former Syrian opposition figure told WaPo that the whole point of this was quagmire: weakening Bashar al-Assad, but not too much.

Supplied mostly from stocks owned by Saudi Arabia, delivered across the Turkish border and stamped with CIA approval, the [TOW] missiles were intended to fulfill another of the Obama administration's goals in Syria – Assad's negotiated exit from power. The

plan, as described by administration officials, was to exert sufficient military pressure on Assad's forces to persuade him to compromise – but not so much that his government would precipitously collapse and leave a dangerous power vacuum in Damascus.

Consider what this strategy means for civilians on the ground, especially refugees that the international community is already underfunding.

Even crazier, though, is that the US believed we could prevent our Saudi allies from pressing their advantage.

"A primary driving factor in Russia's calculus was the realization that the Assad regime was militarily weakening and in danger of losing territory in northwestern Syria. The TOWs played an outsize role in that," said Oubai Shahbandar, a Dubai-based consultant who used to work with the Syrian opposition.

"I think even the Americans were surprised at how successful they've been," he added.

[snip]

But the TOW missile program is already in progress, and all the indications are that it will continue. Saudi Arabia, the chief supplier, has pledged a "military" response to the Russian incursion, and rebel commanders say they have been assured more will arrive imminently.

In any case, our "strategy" in Syria seemed to misunderstand both our Saudi allies and Assad, not to mention Russia's, intent (unless they intent was to expand the proxy war beyond Ukraine). As well as the consequences.

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# WHILE WE'RE INVESTIGATING INTELLIGENCE FAILURES ON SYRIA...

For the past several weeks, we've had a series of stories about how the intelligence on ISIS was cooked – at least within DIA. I had grand plans to write some posts on it – to track DIA's past recent politicization (which I think should raise some skepticism about these claims, though I find them largely credible), to how the story has developed, and to a number of things that likely aren't even being considered in whether the intelligence is cooked (such as whether treating ISIS as a terrorist group serves an analytical disservice).

Ah well – the posts that might have been.

But amid that frenzy about politicized Syria intelligence, the Guardian reports that in 2012 Russian ambassador Vitaly Churkin offered up Bashar al-Assad as part of a proposed peace deal, purportedly at his government's direction.

Russia proposed more than three years ago that Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, could step down as part of a peace deal, according to a senior negotiator involved in back-channel discussions at the time.

Former Finnish president and Nobel peace prize laureate Martti Ahtisaari said western powers failed to seize on the proposal. Since it was made, in 2012, tens of thousands of people have been killed and millions uprooted, causing the world's gravest refugee crisis since the second world war.

Ahtisaari held talks with envoys from the five permanent members of the UN security council in February 2012. He said that during those discussions, the Russian ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, laid out a three-point plan, which included a proposal for Assad to cede power at some point after peace talks had started between the regime and the opposition.

But he said that the US, Britain and France were so convinced that the Syrian dictator was about to fall, they ignored the proposal.

[snip]

"The most intriguing was the meeting I had with Vitaly Churkin because I know this guy," Ahtisaari recalled. "We don't necessarily agree on many issues but we can talk candidly. I explained what I was doing there and he said: 'Martti, sit down and I'll tell you what we should do.'

"He said three things: One – we should not give arms to the opposition. Two – we should get a dialogue going between the opposition and Assad straight away. Three – we should find an elegant way for Assad to step aside."

I'm not so sure I buy this was a real offer from Russia. Possibly it was a trial balloon designed to prove that on Syria, as on Libya, the western powers were lying about their ultimate goals being regime change (though obviously this was an offer to remove Assad, though not his regime).

China Matters has a lot to say about this disclosure, arguing that it confirms his observation in the wake of a July 17, 2012 terrorist attack on Assad that the US was probably partnering with al Qaeda. Those posts are well worth reading (and the potential roles of David Petraeus and Hillary Clinton in such a



scheme – one which Obama temporarily halted in summer 2012, only to reconsider it in 2013 – are equally worth considering).

But here's the other question that must be raised from this article.

What the fuck kind of intelligence failure in 2012 had everyone in the US government believing that Assad was about to fall? I mean, I get that that was the conventional wisdom at the time (a CW China Matters rightly takes on in his post). But there were plenty of people (CM is one, Moon of Alabama another, Joshua Landis another) who were predicting Assad would be able to withstand that assault. Indeed, CM argues that Assad's ability to withstand the July 2012 decapitation strike should have been the clue.

What sources were leading both the press and US intelligence to believe Assad was going to fall?

If you buy that the Russians were willing to make a reasonable deal of some sort in 2012, then the mistaken belief Assad was about to fall has been almost as catastrophic as the intelligence failures that got us into the Iraq War in terms of deaths and dislocation. They've been far more damaging, at least thus far, than cooked intelligence on ISIS. That bad intelligence likely comes the same vicinity as the intelligence that said we could insert a small group of fighters in al Nusra's vicinity without the al Qaeda affiliate responding.

Admittedly, it's likely there has been some internal accountability for this intelligence failure. David Petraeus probably could have withstood sharing code word intelligence with his mistress, after all. And Bandar bin Sultan, who surely was in charge of this effort, lost the Saudi intelligence portfolio.

But it is likely we're taking advice from the same people as we did then, with the same disastrous consequences. Which go far beyond fluffing US success against ISIS.

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# **INSANITY CONTINUES TO BUILD AROUND PROSPECT OF IRAN NUCLEAR PACT**

From the nature of the political feeding frenzy surrounding the ongoing P5+1 negotiations with Iran on Iran's nuclear technology, it is hard to believe that the Joint Plan of Action under which the countries are now operating was extended last November through the end of June of this year. At the time of that extension, the US announced a goal of having the political framework of the final agreement worked out by March 1. That date has now slipped to March 31, but current negotiations are still aimed at getting the political framework in place before the final details get ironed out. But with Benjamin Netanyahu making a speech to a Joint Session of Congress next week and other assorted madness, one would think that we are in the last few hours of the negotiating window.

Of course, one of the groups most upset by the possible outcome of removing the US sanctions against Iran is the MEK. Their latest tantrum, yesterday, in which they tried to claim that they had discovered a new, secret uranium enrichment site, was mostly ignored by the world. Jeffrey Lewis was quick to dismiss the accusation.

I had noted yesterday that Dianne Feinstein and Richard Durbin had tried to give Netanyahu some bipartisany-ness during his visit by inviting him to a closed-door meeting with Senate Democrats, but Netanyahu declined the invitation, inexplicably claiming that meeting would lend a partisan nature to his nonpartisan appearance before Congress. Bibi also got slapped down, though, as his bid to get several

Arab ambassadors to show up for his speech has been rejected outright.

Just as the US military hates to see peace break out somewhere where they could otherwise be arming and training freedom fighters, Iran's military seems especially upset by the prospect of a deal with the West. The IRGC is so upset about what is going on that today they broke one of their biggest toys in a fit of rage. Just under a year ago, word came out that Iran was building a replica of a Nimitz-class US aircraft carrier:

Intelligence analysts studying satellite photos of Iranian military installations first noticed the vessel rising from the Gachin shipyard, near Bandar Abbas on the Persian Gulf, last summer. The ship has the same distinctive shape and style of the Navy's Nimitz-class carriers, as well as the Nimitz's number 68 neatly painted in white near the bow. Mock aircraft can be seen on the flight deck.

The Iranian mock-up, which American officials described as more like a barge than a warship, has no nuclear propulsion system and is only about two-thirds the length of a typical 1,100-foot-long Navy carrier. Intelligence officials do not believe that Iran is capable of building an actual aircraft carrier.

/snip/

Navy and other American intelligence analysts surmise that the vessel, which Fifth Fleet wags have nicknamed the Target Barge, is something that Iran could tow to sea, anchor and blow up – while filming the whole thing to make a propaganda point, if, say, the talks with the Western powers over Iran's nuclear program go south.

Marcy had a bit of fun with the barge at the

time, comparing it to our F-35 program.

But now, instead of waiting for the P5+1 talks to “go south”, the IRGC has chosen to destroy their target barge in war games that were launched today. And, just as predicted a year ago, the destruction of the barge was televised. From AP via the Washington Post:

State TV showed footage of missiles fired from the coast and the fast boats striking the mock U.S. aircraft carrier. The drills, which also included shooting down a drone and planting undersea mines, were the first to involve a replica of a U.S. carrier.

“American aircraft carriers are very big ammunition depots housing a lot of missiles, rockets, torpedoes and everything else,” the Guard’s navy chief, Adm. Ali Fadavi, said on state TV, adding that a direct hit by a missile could set off a large secondary explosion. Last month Fadavi said his force is capable of sinking American aircraft carriers in the event of war.

Here is a PressTV segment on the war games, complete with some footage of torpedoes hitting the barge:

Additional footage with more direct hits on the barge can be seen in this PressTV story.

The US Navy has now been sternly warned not to tow any barges into the Strait of Hormuz.

Meanwhile, more negotiations are scheduled for Monday.

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# NOW WILL SAUDI SUPPORT FOR 9/11 BECOME TOXIC?

Back in a Twitter discussion with Jack Goldsmith about whether President Obama could force a peace settlement with Iran through Congress, I suggested the way to change the politics in DC would be to exercise Executive discretion over all the intelligence we've got that shows the Saudis backed 9/11, continued ignore support for al Qaeda until at least 2010, and haven't really tried all that hard to crack down on other Islamic extremists either.

As luck would have it, just as Obama faces a renewed 2 month deadline for his peace plan with Iran (which reportedly is showing progress), and just as Democrats are being forced to snub Bibi's address to Congress, lawyers for victims of 9/11 submitted a large filing on their case against Saudi Arabia accompanied by Zacarias Moussaoui's description of high-level Saudi involvement in 9/11. Moussaoui, you see, claims to have been in charge of a database of all funders to what he called Bin Laden Group (you call it al Qaeda, he said) back in 1998 and 1999 – significantly, in the wake of the African Embassy bombings. (Exhibit 5, Exhibit 6, Exhibit 7, Exhibit 8) And it reads like a who's who of Saudi elite.

some of them extremely famous, like Waleed -- Waleed bin Talal, Prince -- Prince Turki Al Faisal Al Saud, Prince -- Prince Bandar bin Sultan Al Saud, Prince Mohammed Al Faisal Al Saud, and Haifa Al Faisal Al Saud, I know there was another -- a woman. It will come back to me.

The timing on this is quite curious. The plaintiffs actually took Moussaoui's deposition on October 20 and 21 of last year – not long after a public report that Florence prison authorities had been using the Special Administrative Measures against Moussaoui to prevent the deposition. That deposition, of

course, would have come a month before the initial peace deadline with Iran. Since then, the suit has been in a bit of a stall (particularly as it relates to Saudi involvement) up to the submission of this filing. While the timing seems incidental, this means that just before this came out, all the powers that be were in Riyadh celebrating King Abdullah (and surely trying to ensure the longevity of the US-Saudi embrace), and Bandar was getting fired – again – though surely for palace politics.

Even more curious timing, however, is Alwaleed bin Talal's decision to sell most of his News Corp stocks, even while reiterating his love for all things Murdoch.

Alwaleed's Kingdom Holding cut its ownership of Class B shares to 2 million from 13.2 million, or 6.6 percent, it said in a statement to the Saudi bourse today. The sale generated 705 million riyals (\$188 million), which will be used for other investments, it said. Through Kingdom, Prince Alwaleed holds stakes in companies including Citigroup Inc. and Twitter Inc.

Alwaleed, who had the second-largest holding of voting stock in News Corp. after the Murdoch family, has been a staunch ally of the Australian media baron. He publicly supported the family's running of News Corp. amid phone-hacking revelations in 2011 that saw the company abandon its bid to take over the rest of European pay-TV operator Sky Plc.

"The reduction of Kingdom's holding in News Corp. has been decided in the context of a general portfolio review," Alwaleed said in a separate e-mailed statement. "We remain firm believers in News Corp.'s competent management and are fully supportive of Rupert Murdoch and his family."

This move also comes just after DOJ announced it would not be pursuing News Corp under the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, so at a time when News Corp should be politically safer here in the US.

Who knows whether we'll let Moussaoui change the narrative on Saudi support for 9/11. Especially given the underlying risk: Moussaoui's testimony dates all this financial (and logistical) support to the period just after the Embassy bombings, but it suggests these figures supported bin Laden both before and after. That would back the claims of a number of former CIA types who argue Riyadh Station Chief John Brennan prevented the CIA from investigating these ties in the lead-up to the attack on our Embassies.

That is, Moussaoui's testimony carries risks not just for key Saudi elites. But also for the CIA Director.

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## ZBIG'S PLOTTING OVER CHILEAN SEA BASS

Earlier this month, President Obama hosted a dinner with past foreign policy luminaries to explain his plan to combat ISIL. He served Chilean sea bass and d'Anjou pear salad as they discussed the future of America's empire.

Harman described the dinner on Monday as "focused and thoughtful." Over a dinner of d'anjou pear salad and Chilean sea bass, Obama, Vice President Biden and the outside experts engaged in a deep discussion of the options to combat the Islamic State, those who participated said.

Among the attendees was Zbigniew Brzezinski (see

the full list of attendees below), Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor.

I thought it a curious choice, given how much of the Blowback we're still fighting he birthed. As NSA, after all, Zbig crafted what he thought was a brilliant plan to draw the Soviet Union into a quagmire in Afghanistan. Even after al Qaeda had started attacking the US in Africa, Zbig thought fostering well-trained Islamic terrorists was an acceptable trade-off for having lured the Soviet Union into an embarrassing defeat.

Brzezinski: Yes. According to the official version of history, CIA aid to the Mujahadeen began during 1980, that is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan, 24 Dec 1979. But the reality, secretly guarded until now, is completely otherwise. Indeed, it was July 3, 1979 that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, 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.

Q: Despite this risk, you were an advocate of this covert action. But perhaps you yourself desired this Soviet entry into war and looked to provoke it?

B: It isn't quite that. We didn't push the Russians to intervene, but we knowingly increased the probability that they would.

Q: When the Soviets justified their intervention by asserting that they intended to fight against a secret involvement of the United States in Afghanistan, people didn't believe them. However, there was a basis of truth. You don't regret anything today?

B: Regret what? That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect



of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter. We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam war. Indeed, for almost 10 years, Moscow had to carry on a war unsupportable by the government, a conflict that brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire.

Q: And neither do you regret having supported the Islamic fundamentalism, having given arms and advice to future terrorists?

B: What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?

Zbig doesn't acknowledge it here, but another reason he thought this was such a great idea is because the Iranian revolution was already in full swing, and he hoped to counter our loss of footprint there with something to keep the Russians busy next door.

In so many ways that decision has led inexorably to where we are, doing the bidding of dangerous Saudi allies who are actually a cause of the extremism we fight, not its solution.

Even before the Chilean sea bass dinner, I've been wondering whether the US would double down on its commitment to the Saudis, in spite of the way they've fostered this terrorist threat, or whether we'd use the opportunity to cement the deal with Iran, giving us more space from the Saudis.

I'm embarrassed I even wondered. I should have known from heavy-handed intercept of Russian jets and the increasing sanctions on both Russia and Iran that we intended to gain advantage both

against ISIS and against those who question our unlimited hegemony.

But this account of how the Saudis came to join in bombing campaigns against Islamic extremists makes it rather clear.

The Americans knew a lot was riding on a Sept. 11 meeting with the king of Saudi Arabia at his summer palace on the Red Sea.

A year earlier, King Abdullah had fumed when President Barack Obama called off strikes against the regime of Syria's Bashar al-Assad. This time, the U.S. needed the king's commitment to support a different Syrian mission—against the extremist group Islamic State—knowing there was little hope of assembling an Arab front without it.

At the palace, Secretary of State John Kerry requested assistance up to and including air strikes, according to U.S. and Gulf officials. "We will provide any support you need," the king said.

That moment, more than any other, set in train the U.S. air campaign in Syria against Islamic State, according to U.S. and Gulf officials. Mr. Obama made clear he would only authorize strikes if regional allies agreed to join the effort.

[snip]

The process gave the Saudis leverage to extract a fresh U.S. commitment to beef up training for rebels fighting Mr. Assad, whose demise the Saudis still see as a top priority.

[snip]

After Islamic State made startling gains in Iraq, Saudi officials told Mr. Kerry in June that Iraqi leader Nouri al-Maliki, a Shiite with close ties to

Iran, needed to go, according to U.S officials. Once that happened, Riyadh would step up its role against Islamic State and work to bring other Gulf states onboard. The Obama administration had come to a similar conclusion and started to maneuver Mr. al-Maliki out of office.

[snip]

Two of the F-15 pilots were members of the Saudi royal family, including Prince Khaled bin Salman, son of the crown prince. In the third wave of the initial attack, half of the attack airplanes in the sky were from Arab countries.

There's far more at the link: the Saudi agreement to host the training (something I'll return to), Bandar's presence – and smiles – at the meeting on September 11, (Though, if I'm not mistaken, the story had more details about the meeting between Saudi Ambassador Adel al-Jubeir and Obama when it was first posted last night, including that they used first names.)

Whether the US means to faithfully execute their half of the bargain or not, and whether the Saudis are dealing with us in good faith, remains a very good question.

But if they really intend to help the Saudis and Qataris take out Assad (not because he's a brutal dictator, of course, but because he's not their brutal dictator), certain things must come with that: a means to undercut the momentum our fight against ISIL will necessarily give Iran and Russia. Otherwise, no amount of training of "moderate" rebels will make a difference – or keep the Saudis happy.

Maybe that's not what we intend. Maybe we've still got a plan in place to ditch the Saudis. But if not, expect some kind of Zbig plan that will likely backfire worse than his earlier one.

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Sandy Berger  
Zbigniew Brzezinski  
Tom Donilon  
Michele Flournoy  
Richard Haass  
Steve Hadley  
Jane Harman  
Michael Morell  
Strobe Talbott

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## **GRAFT-SHARING AGREEMENT SIGNED, GHANI AWARDED AFGHAN PRESIDENCY**

On Sunday, Ashraf Ghani was declared the new President of Afghanistan. Despite months of “auditing” the votes cast in the runoff, we have not yet had an announcement of actual vote totals. That is because Abdullah Abdullah, who won the first round of voting by over a million votes still disputed that he could have then lost by over a million votes in the runoff. Abdullah had refused to play along with the plan to announce vote totals at the same time as awarding the presidency to Ghani. Ghani will be sworn into office on Monday.

In this morning’s New York Times, Michael Gordon transcribes the State Department’s elation over the planned signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement shortly after Ghani is sworn in:

**|** A new security agreement authorizing the

presence of American forces in Afghanistan after 2014 will be signed just days after the nation's new president is inaugurated on Monday, a senior State Department official said Wednesday.

Both Ashraf Ghani, Afghanistan's new president-elect, and his chief opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, indicated during their election campaign that they supported the security agreement. And both men recommitted themselves to the agreement in recent weeks as they worked out the terms of a power-sharing arrangement, American officials said.

"We expect that it will be fully signed in a matter of days after the new administration starts," said the State Department official, who spoke on condition of anonymity under the agency's rules for briefing reporters. "No one has talked about reopening the issues."

Though widely anticipated, the signing of the agreement is an important step that would provide a legal basis for American forces to advise Afghan forces after 2014.

Abdullah is reported as "optimistic" about the new national unity government and is saying all the right things about Afghanistan appearing to have avoided a violent resolution of the election conflict.

As a full-time skeptic, though, I can't help wondering if at least a part of the prolonged process of negotiating the national unity government was just haggling over how much cash will be in Abdullah's monthly bag from the CIA. After all, Karzai's take is known to have been at least tens of millions of dollars.

Details of the "power-sharing" agreement are beginning to come out:

Dr. Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, the president-elect of Afghanistan and the chief executive officer Dr. Abdullah Abdullah have shared the key government institutions almost on equal basis among themselves.

According to documents obtained by 8am newspaper, the ministry of interior and finance has been taken by Dr. Ashraf Ghani while the ministry of defense and foreign affairs have been taken by Dr. Abdullah.

Other key ministries and government institutions have also been equally shared among the two teams, according to the documents.

So although Ghani is to be President, it is very significant that Abdullah will have control of the defense ministry. Returning to my link above about the bags o' cash that Karzai got, those payments are mere pocket change compared to the real cash that Afghan officials are able to siphon out of the firehose of US cash flowing into the country. As noted there, in 2011 the US committed around \$11 billion to the Afghan Security Forces Fund alone and in that same year, SIGAR quoted the Congressional Research Service finding that around \$4.5 billion in cash left the country through the Kabul airport.

Not quite as much cash will be there for the taking in 2015 and beyond, but by being in charge of the defense ministry, Abdullah would appear to be first in line for siphoning off parts of the \$4.1 billion in funds from the US and one billion Euros from the EU plan for ANSF support next year.

By controlling the ministry of finance, Ghani also will have access to vast sums that can be siphoned off, so their graft-sharing appears on the surface to be fairly equitable. Also, one would presume that the interior department will be in line for bribes relating to Afghanistan's

reputed vast mineral wealth.

It appears that both Ghani and Abdullah are very well cared-for in their carefully negotiated graft-sharing agreement.

**Postscript:** There is one more aspect of Gordon's transcription this morning that can't be left unchallenged:

The signing of the agreement would not end the debate over the continuing American role in Afghanistan. Given the escalation of violence that followed the withdrawal of the last American forces from Iraq in 2011, some critics, including former ranking officials in the Obama administration, have urged the White House to adopt a more flexible approach toward removing troops from Afghanistan.

As I pointed out in this post, a full 18 months passed between the withdrawal of the last US troop from Iraq and the surge in violence there. Those 18 months are now being purged from the collective memory of the hive mind of the DC village.

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## THE COVERT OPERATION UNDERMINING US CREDIBILITY AGAINST ISIS

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

The United States has conducted an escalating campaign of deadly airstrikes against the extremists of the Islamic

State for more than a month. But that appears to have done little to tamp down the conspiracy theories still circulating from the streets of Baghdad to the highest levels of Iraqi government that the C.I.A. is secretly behind the same extremists that it is now attacking.

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

[snip]

The prevalence of the theory in the streets underscored the deep suspicions of the American military’s return to Iraq more than a decade after its invasion, in 2003. The casual endorsement by a senior official, though, was also a pointed reminder that the new Iraqi government may be an awkward partner for the American-led campaign to drive out the extremists.

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

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

Let me clear: I am not saying the US currently backs ISIS, as the NYT’s headline but not story suggests is the conspiracy theory. Nor am I saying the US willingly built a terrorist state



that would go on to found a caliphate in Iraq.

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

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

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

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

kingdom's Syria policy and other simmering tensions, after initially refusing to accept Bandar's offers to resign.

[snip]

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

[snip]

The worry at the time, punctuated by a February meeting between U.S. National Security Adviser Susan Rice and the intelligence chiefs of Turkey, Qatar, Jordan, and others in the region, was that ISIS and al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra had emerged as the preeminent rebel forces in Syria. The governments who took part [reportedly committed](#) to cut off ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, and support the FSA instead. But while official support from Qatar and Saudi Arabia appears to have dried up, non-governmental military and financial support [may still be flowing](#) from these countries to Islamist groups.

Thus, to the extent that we worked with Bandar on a covert op to create an opposition force to overthrow Assad, we may well have had an indirect hand in its creation. That doesn't mean we wanted to create ISIS. It means we are led by the nose by the Saudis generally and were by Bandar specifically, in part because we are so reliant on them for our HUMINT in such matters.

Particularly given Saudi support for Sunnis during our Iraq occupation, can you fault Iraqis for finding our tendency to get snookered by the Saudis suspect?

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

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

Everybody's well aware there's been a covert operation, operating in the region to train forces, moderate forces, to go into Syria and to be out there, that we've been doing this the last two years. And probably the most true measure of the effectiveness of moderate forces would be, what has been the effectiveness over that last two years of this covert operation, of training 2,000 to 3,000 of these moderates? Are they a growing force? Have they gained ground? How effective are they? What can you tell us about this effort that's gone on, and has it been a part of the success that you see that you're presenting this new plan on?

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

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

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

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

To the core question that you raise, this is a problem that both the Administration, as well as the Senate leadership must be willing to deal with. Because when it comes to questions of being briefed on covert operations this committee does not have access to that information. Yet it is charged with a responsibility of determining whether or not the people of the United States should – through their Representatives – support an Authorization for the Use of Military Force. It is unfathomable to me to understand how this committee is going to get to those conclusions without understanding all of the elements of military engagement both overtly and covertly. ... I'll call it, for lack of a better term, a procedural hurdle we're going to have to overcome if we want the information to make an informed judgment and get members on board.

How are we supposed to reassure Iraqis we're not still indirectly in bed with ISIS if the Administration won't even brief Congress about what's going on – and, more importantly, what did go on? As Tom Udall says, "everybody's well aware" we were working with Bandar for months to

strengthen the opposition to Assad, but not even Congress is permitted to learn the details of it.

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

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

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

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

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