



**Sleeping with the enemy:  
Opposition grows to CIA-backed al-Qaeda proxies in Syria**

**Dr Christina Lin**

**February 2016**

**Abstract**

There is growing opposition by the American public to current US policy of supporting al Qaeda affiliates in Syria to overthrow the Assad regime. This policy not only empowers Al Qaeda to further destabilize the Middle East, but is now a threat to Asian security as al Qaeda and ISIS are establishing strongholds among the Muslim population.

**About ISPSW**

The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is objective and task oriented, and impartial to party politics.

In an ever more complex international environment of globalized economic processes and worldwide political, ecological, social and cultural change, that bring major opportunities but also risks, decision makers in enterprises and politics depend more than ever before on the advice of highly qualified experts.

ISPSW offers a range of services, including strategic analyses, security consultancy, executive coaching and intercultural competency. ISPSW publications examine a wide range of topics relating to politics, economy, international relations, and security/defence. ISPSW network experts have operated in executive positions, in some cases for decades, and command wide-ranging experience in their respective areas of specialization.

**About the Author of this Issue**

Dr Christina Lin is a Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations at SAIS-Johns Hopkins University. She is the author of "The New Silk Road: China's Energy Strategy in the Greater Middle East" (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy), and a former director for China policy at the U.S. Department of Defense.



*Christina Lin*



## Analysis

Recently, there's been an expanding chorus calling for the American public to debate the merits of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) supporting al-Qaeda groups in Syria.

Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard (D-HI) in the House Armed Services Committee has been leading the choir with bipartisan bill H.R. 4108 to stop the CIA's illegal arming and funding of al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria, and others increasingly share her alarm.<sup>1</sup>

### US Syrian policy empowering Al Qaeda

A new joint report released in January by Institute for the Study of War and the American Enterprise Institute warned that al-Qaeda in Syria — al-Nusra — poses a greater existential threat to the US and Europe than ISIS— which was originally formed as al-Qaeda in Iraq.<sup>2</sup>

It criticized current US policy of being ISIS-centric and ignoring the threats posed by other al-Qaeda and Islamic extremist groups with similar goals: “Any strategy that leaves Jabhat al-Nusra in place will fail to secure the American homeland.”

The report also warned al-Nusra has “established an expansive network of partnership with local opposition groups that have grown either dependent on or fiercely loyal to the organization” and using them to procure US funding and weapons.



Indeed in Idlib province that borders Turkey, since December 2014 the moderates have been ousted and replaced by al-Nusra and other extremists groups, according to then-commander of Harakat Hazm.<sup>3</sup> Idlib is now the headquarters of a new “moderate” opposition—al-Nusra-led Army of Conquest backed by Turkey/Saudi/Qatar.

Current US policy that is empowering al-Qaeda in Syria (al-Nusra) in order to defeat al-Qaeda in Iraq (ISIS) also alarmed counter-terrorism experts such as Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, editor of the *Long War Journal*. In a

<sup>1</sup> <http://gabbard.house.gov/index.php/press-releases/520-reps-tulsi-gabbard-austin-scott-introduce-legislation-to-end-illegal-u-s-war-to-overthrow-syrian-government-of-assad>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0ZlrKyai0I>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.aei.org/publication/al-qaeda-and-isis-existential-threats-to-the-us-and-europe/>; <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/25/politics/al-qaeda-al-nusra-isis-threat-experts/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/al-qaeda-inspired-rebels-gain-in-syria-making-life-even-worse-for-us-allied-forces/2014/12/05/0930bde0-7388-11e4-95a8-fe0b46e8751a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/al-qaeda-inspired-rebels-gain-in-syria-making-life-even-worse-for-us-allied-forces/2014/12/05/0930bde0-7388-11e4-95a8-fe0b46e8751a_story.html)



recent *Daily Beast* article with Nathaniel Barr, they called for Congressional hearings on the CIA program “since this initiative is benefiting the very jihadist groups the US has been fighting for the past 15 years.”<sup>4</sup>

They also noted: “Allowing this program to continue without carefully thinking through the benefits, costs, and possible unintended consequences is incredibly risky and could erode public trust and support.”

It is difficult to imagine under what circumstances the American public would support the US government using taxpayer money to fund al-Qaeda, even as US troops continue to battle them in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> Nor is it clear how this would boost legitimacy of US foreign policy when it backs jihadists that persecute religious and ethnic minorities.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, by empowering al-Qaeda-led “rebel groups” to fight the Syrian army while allowing ISIS to thrive and expand, both al-Qaeda and ISIS have rapidly spread to Asia.

### US-backed jihadists pivot to Asia—again



*Al-Nusra fighters in Syria*

This is not the first time US-backed jihadists have pivoted to Asia. They first pivoted in the 1980s when the US and Saudi Arabia sponsored Afghan jihadists, and this injection of Islamic extremism was further inflamed by the proliferation of Saudi-backed madrassas that preached Wahhabism in Asia.

As a result of the “Wahhabization” that radicalized Southeast Asian Muslims, the region fell victim to al-Qaeda affiliate Jemaah Islamiah (JI) that was responsible for the 2002 Bali bombing and a string of terrorist attacks in Indonesia from 2003 to 2005. Now, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Philippines are witnessing a revival of Islamic extremism via the spread of ISIS and resurgence of al-Qaeda.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/01/19/the-cia-s-syria-program-and-the-perils-of-proxies.html>; Andrew Cockburn, “A Special Relationship: The United States is teaming up with Al Qaeda, again”, Harper’s Magazine, January 2016, <http://harpers.org/archive/2016/01/a-special-relationship/>; Abdalghne Karoof, “CIA-Backed Rebels Fight Alongside al-Qaeda in Syria”, Newsweek, April 30, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/cia-backed-rebels-fight-alongside-al-qaeda-wing-syria-327064>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/30/us/politics/as-us-focuses-on-isis-and-the-taliban-al-qaeda-re-emerges.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/30/us/politics/as-us-focuses-on-isis-and-the-taliban-al-qaeda-re-emerges.html?_r=0)  
<sup>6</sup> “Syria conflict: Al-Nusra fighters kill Druze Villagers”, BBC, June 11, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33092902>; Simon Caldwell, “Syrian archbishop criticizes US for siding with al-Qaeda”, Catholic Herald, October 6, 2015, <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2015/10/06/syrian-archbishop-criticises-us-for-siding-with-al-qaeda/>; <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2255103/Syria-rebels-beheaded-Christian-fed-dogs-fears-grow-Islamist-atrocities.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://time.com/4182127/indonesia-jakarta-attacks-isis-is-terrorism/>



Given that ISIS is already composed of many CIA-backed “moderate” jihadists that defected and brought along US weapons, continued US support for jihadists in Syria risks repeating the dangerous pattern of empowering and improving ISIS, al-Nusra, and various al-Qaeda groups’ military capabilities in the Middle East and now, Asia.<sup>8</sup>

Observing US policy of arming jihadi proxies, Professor Brahma Chellaney of India’s Center for Policy Research said “it should be obvious that those waging violent jihad can never be moderate.”<sup>9</sup>

Singapore’s late Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew likewise rebuked US policy of only seeking military solutions to terrorism. During a 2003 interview with Fareed Zakaria, Lee argued: “In killing terrorists, you will only kill the worker bees. The queen bees are the preachers, who teach a deviant form of Islam in schools and Islamic centers, who capture and twist the minds of the young.”<sup>10</sup>

General Jonathan Shaw, Britain’s former assistant Chief of the Defence Staff, joins Lee in this opinion. In an October 2014 *Telegraph* article, he argued that Qatar and Saudi Arabia, by spending billions of dollars promoting and proselytizing militant Wahhabi Salafism, had ignited a “time bomb” given that “ISIL is a violent expression of Wahhabist Salafism.”

In fact, this violent creed so changed Malaysian society over the past decades that in February 2015, *Al Jazeera* featured an open letter from a Malaysian Muslim pleading with Saudi King Salman to end human suffering by stopping the proliferation of Wahhabism worldwide.<sup>11</sup>

And as Chellaney warned, “No matter how many bombs the US and its allies drop, the Saudi-financed *madrassas* will continue to indoctrinate tomorrow’s jihadists.”<sup>12</sup>

In the face of the deleterious consequences of the CIA’s proxy program in Syria and increasing terrorism threats to both the American homeland and US allies in Asia, the US Congress should hold hearings on the merits of this program in short order. Moreover, Washington and her Asian allies should also put their foot down, and get Saudi Arabia and Qatar to stop feeding those queen bees.

\*\*\*

**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

This article was first published by *Asia Times* on February 4, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Jordan Schachtel, “US-Backed “Moderate” Free Syrian Army Factions join ISIS Terror Group”, Breitbart, July 8, 2014, <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2014/07/08/us-backed-moderate-free-syrian-army-factions-join-islamic-state-terror-group/>

<sup>9</sup> Brahma Chellaney, “The Western Roots of anti-Western Terror”, Project Syndicate, November 16, 2015, <http://chellaney.net/2015/11/16/the-western-roots-of-anti-western-terror/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.newsweek.com/we-need-get-queen-bees-133219>

<sup>11</sup> <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/2/open-letter-to-saudi-king-salman-bin-abdul-aziz.html>

<sup>12</sup> <http://chellaney.net/2015/12/25/saudi-arabias-phony-war-on-terror/>