Leaked Hillary Clinton emails show U.S. allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar supported ISIS

More Ben Norton.
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Militant Islamist fighters on a tank take part in a military parade along the streets of northern Raqqa province June 30, 2014. (Credit: Reuters)

A recently leaked 2014 email from Hillary Clinton acknowledges, citing Western intelligence sources, that the U.S.-backed regimes in Saudi Arabia and Qatar have supported ISIS.

“We need to use our diplomatic and more traditional intelligence assets to bring pressure on the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which are providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL and other radical Sunni groups in the region,” the document states.

This adds to a growing body of evidence that theocratic Gulf monarchies have helped fuel the surge of extremist groups throughout the Middle East.

Another newly released email, from January 2016, includes an excerpt from a private October 2013 speech in which Clinton acknowledged that “the Saudis have exported more extreme ideology than any other place on earth over the course of the last 30 years.”

In that same speech, Clinton noted that she wanted to pursue “a more robust, covert action trying to vet, identify, train and arm cadres of rebels” in Syria, that would have fought both the government of President Bashar al-Assad and “the Al-Qaeda-related jihadist groups that have, unfortunately, been attracted to Syria.”

She added however, “That’s been complicated by the fact that the Saudis and others are shipping large amounts of weapons — and pretty indiscriminately — not at all targeted toward the people that we think would be the more moderate, least likely, to cause problems in the future.”

In a June 2013 speech to Goldman Sachs, an excerpt of which is also included in that January 2016 message, Clinton emphasized that “the Saudis in particular are not necessarily the stablest regimes that you can find on the planet.”

These emails are part of a trove released this week by transparency organization WikiLeaks. The group, which was founded by detained whistleblower Julian Assange, says it obtained thousands of emails to and from John Podesta, a close Clinton ally and the chair of her presidential campaign.

In August 2014, Clinton — who had stopped serving as secretary of state the year before — sent Podesta a list of notes on Syria, Iraq and U.S. policy in the Middle East, in an email titled “Here’s what I mentioned.”
Clinton indicated that the information in the message is based on Western intelligence sources, U.S. intelligence source and sources in the Middle East.

It is not known who wrote the notes. The language used in the document is, however, similar to that in other documents drafted by the U.S. State Department. The notes also use the same format and the same unconventional spelling of “Basher al Assad” to refer to the Syrian president, like previous intelligence memos (some of which were classified) sent to Clinton by her former aide Sidney Blumenthal.

Responding to the strategy outlined in the notes, Podesta said, “I think we are headed down this path in Iraq.” But “Syria elements are vexing,” he added.

“Agree but there may be opportunities as the Iraqi piece improves,” Clinton wrote back.

The message also reveals that the U.S. saw the rise of the genocidal Islamic State as an opportunity. “With all of its tragic aspects, the advance of ISIL through Iraq gives the U.S. Government an opportunity to change the way it deals with the chaotic security situation in North Africa and the Middle East,” the document says, adding, “The most important factor in this matter is to make use of intelligence resources and Special Operations troops in an aggressive manner.”

Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign has neither confirmed nor denied the authenticity of the emails released by WikiLeaks. When reporters asked Clinton herself about them this week, however, she did confirm that the January 2016 message, which includes excerpts of her paid speeches to Wall Street, is authentic.

Salon contacted the Clinton campaign with a request for confirmation of the emails. Spokesperson Glen Caplin wrote back, “We continue to not confirm the authenticity of any individual emails.” He also accused the Donald Trump campaign and WikiLeaks of having ties to Russia and being part of a larger campaign to undermine Clinton and “U.S. interests.”

This August 2014 email is by no means the first time Saudi Arabia and Qatar, close U.S. allies, have been accused of supporting ISIS and other extremist groups.

In fact, in October 2014, just a few weeks after Clinton sent the intelligence notes to Podesta, Vice President Joe Biden harshly criticized Saudi Arabia and Turkey in a talk at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government. He noted, “They were so determined to take down” Assad that they “poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad – except that the people who were being supplied were al-Nusra, and al-Qaida, and the extremist elements of jihadis who were coming from other parts of the world.” He added, “We could not convince our colleagues to stop supplying them.”

Biden later apologized to Turkey, but what he said was absolutely true. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a right-wing Islamist, gave many thousands of Salafi (hard-line Sunni Islamist) militants free rein to cross his border. Experts and former ISIS militants say Turkey at least indirectly supported ISIS for years, in order to weaken both Kurdish rebels and the Syrian government.

U.S. officials and many analysts and news reports have long denied that the Saudi and Qatari monarchies have supported ISIS, instead claiming the support was coming from rich donors in those countries. U.S. officials told CBS in September 2014 that wealthy “angel investors” in Qatar and other Gulf states were sending money to ISIS.

The leaked August 2014 email, however, shows that Western intelligence sources knew the regimes
Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have repressive theocratic monarchies that base their laws on a fundamentalist interpretation of Sharia, or Islamic law. Human rights groups have accused both of a vast array of systematic rights abuses.

ISIS’ ideology is very similar to Wahhabism, the extremist Sunni ideology spread by Saudi Arabia. In fact, when the Islamic State needed textbooks for children in its Syrian capital, Raqqa, the extremist group printed out copies of Saudi state textbooks it found online and used those.

Well before the Islamic State existed in its modern form, the U.S. and other Western governments acknowledged that Saudi Arabia and other theocratic Gulf states supported extremist groups like al-Qaida.

As Salon has previously reported, a classified 2009 cable signed by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (also released by WikiLeaks) acknowledged, “Donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide.”

“In Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for al-Qa’ida, the Taliban, [Lashkar-e-Taiba], and other terrorist groups,” the State Department memo said, adding, “It has been an ongoing challenge to persuade Saudi officials to treat terrorist financing emanating from Saudi Arabia as a strategic priority.”

In August 2014, when Hillary Clinton sent the intelligence email, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant was not yet as strong as it would later become, but it had already declared itself to be a global caliphate several weeks before. In June, the extremist group had invaded and taken control of Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city.

ISIS broke ties with Syria’s al-Qaida affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, several months before that, in February. Ideologically, both groups are almost identical, yet they differed in tactics. Whereas ISIS imposed strict Islamic law and created a fascist-style regime immediately in the areas it seized from the Iraqi and Syrian governments, al-Nusra — which has since rebranded — preferred a more gradual approach.

Syria’s al-Qaida affiliate came to dominate the opposition combating the Syrian government by pursuing a strategy of winning over hearts and minds. It proved to be the most effective rebel force on the ground, its fighters willing to sacrifice their lives in suicide bombings. Unlike ISIS, al-Nusra has preferred to slowly, not quickly, create its own ISIS-style caliphate. A commander of al-Nusra told a reporter in 2012 that strict Sharia law “will be introduced gradually.”

The August 2014 Clinton email indirectly acknowledged that much of the Syrian opposition is dominated by extremist forces, although it still called for the U.S. to support putative “moderate” rebel groups. The intelligence sources stressed that, while the U.S. should fight ISIS, it should use a strategy that “will make certain Basher al Assad does not gain an advantage from these operations.”

By defeating ISIS, the document says, the U.S. can help “restructure the Sunni resistance in Syria, moving the center of power toward moderate forces like the Free Syrian Army.” It continues: “We should return to themselves were providing support to the Islamic State.
plans to provide the FSA, or some group of moderate forces, with equipment that will allow them to deal with a weakened ISIL, and stepped up operations against the Syrian regime," suggesting that this "entire effort should be done with a low profile."

In the early days of ISIS, other Islamist Syrian rebel groups worked with it. ISIS also fought alongside ostensible moderate rebels in battles against the Kurds. Even as recently as June and July, Secretary of State John Kerry spoke of the leading Syrian rebel groups Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham — which are supported by the Gulf states and Turkey — as “subgroups” of ISIS and al-Qaida.

The CIA, which has spent billions of dollars arming and training rebels hoping to topple the Syrian government, relies heavily on Saudi money to fund its covert campaign.

ISIS’ success in taking over land, the August 2014 email to Podesta notes, inspired other militants in Libya, Lebanon and even Jordan.

The intelligence proposed increasing U.S. support for the Kurds in their fight against the Islamic State, so that the “Qataris and Saudis will be put in a position of balancing policy between their ongoing competition to dominate the Sunni world and the consequences of serious U.S. pressure.”

The email outlines the strategy the U.S. has since pursued in Iraq and Syria of supporting Kurdish fighters to beat back ISIS. The document notes that Kurdish Peshmerga fighters “have long standing relationships with CIA officers and Special Forces operators.” It adds that, in an agreement with the Turkish government, the U.S. had previously pledged not to send heavy weapons to the Peshmerga, but the document notes that the rise of ISIS made “this policy obsolete."

Nevertheless, the intelligence sources expressed wariness about being too supportive of the Kurds. They pointed out Iraq’s Sunni regions and government are concerned about possible expansion of Kurdish-controlled territory. The Western intelligence sources hence suggested the U.S. would work with advisors in the Peshmerga command in order to “reassure the concerned parties that, in return for increase autonomy, the [Kurdish Regional Government] will not exclude the Iraqi Government from participation in the management of the oil fields around Kirkuk, and the Mosel Dam hydroelectric facility.”

Update 05:45 PM EDT: This article was updated with a comment from the Hillary Clinton campaign.

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