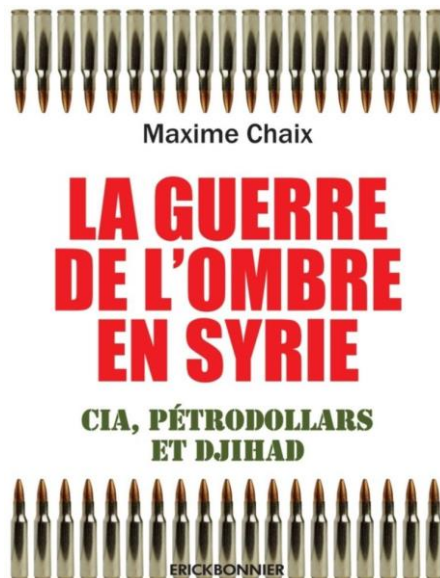


How CIA & Allies Helped Jihadists In Syria: French Covert Ops Expert Exposes New Details

By GlobalGeoNews.com

Maxime Chaix, an expert on clandestine operations, intelligence and US foreign policy, is a journalist and regular contributor to GlobalGeoNews.com. He has written *La guerre de l'ombre en Syrie* (*The Shadow War in Syria*, published in French by Éditions Erick Bonnier), a shocker of a book in which he reveals insightful information on the support which several Western intelligence services provided to jihadist militias in Syria, starting with the CIA. His investigation reveals a multi-faceted state scandal and points out the murky game played by the Western powers and their Middle Eastern allies in the Levant.



An exclusive interview by [Emmanuel Razavi](#) (founder and editor of [Global Geo News.com](#)):

Emmanuel Razavi: First of all, please refresh our memories about what operation Timber Sycamore is.

Maxime Chaix: *Timber Sycamore* is the codename of a covert operation officially authorized by Obama in [June 2013](#) to train and equip the anti-Assad rebellion, but which actually started in [October 2011](#), when the CIA was operating via Britain's MI6 to avoid having [to notify Congress](#) that it was arming the rebels in Syria. Originally, the CIA and MI6 (the British foreign intelligence service) set up a rebel arms supply network in Syria from Libya — a plan that involved the [Saudi, Qatari and Turkish](#) intelligence services.

In 2012, probably in spring, Obama [reluctantly](#) signed a top-secret [executive order](#), of which little is known other than that it authorized the CIA to provide "[non-lethal support](#)" to the rebels in Syria. In concrete terms, then, **what the**

CIA did was to link up its [Qatari and Saudi allies](#) with a number of arms manufacturers in the Balkans (Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Croatia, etc.). With the [backing of NATO](#), which controls arms exports from the Balkans via [EUFOR](#), Qatari and Saudi secret services began buying up weapons and ammunition from these countries to illegally equip anti-Assad rebels.

A few months later, [in October 2012](#), the *New York Times* revealed that **this vast CIA-sponsored arms trafficking was mainly going to support jihadist groups in Syria**, while arms exports by air [were growing](#), with weapons being injected into Syrian territory from “[operation rooms](#)” in Turkey and Jordan, through [the FSA](#) (“Free Syria Army”) and [local arms traffickers](#).

Finally, it turned out that these “operation rooms” were cobbled together by fifteen Western and Middle Eastern intelligence services, including [the DGSE](#) (French foreign intelligence service) and [MI6](#), although we do not yet know exactly what role these various agencies played in this secret war. What is clear — and what I demonstrate in my book with **irrefutable evidence** — is that [tens of thousands](#) of [tons of weapons](#) and [millions](#) of rounds of ammunition were brought into the Syrian theater of war by this operation. It is also proven that these armaments [mostly went](#) to equip jihadist groups, **including the terrorist militia which proclaimed itself “[Islamic State](#)” in June 2014**.

Ultimately, Donald Trump decided to phase out this operation in [early summer 2017](#). This was **a major setback for the CIA**, as the US President was thereby conceding the defeat of the United States and its partners in the war against Syria and its Russian, Iranian and Lebanese allies.

ER: What concrete evidence do you have to show that US intelligence services have provided support to jihadist militias in Syria?

MC: The coordination role that the Agency signed off on in the [fall of 2011](#) is now a proven fact, as we know that it was [belatedly confirmed](#) in June 2018 by Ben Rhodes, Obama’s chief adviser from 2009 to 2017. During the interview in question, Rhodes argued that the blacklisting of al-Nusra Front on the State Department’s list of terrorist organizations in December 2012 was a “[schizophrenic](#)” move, since it was obvious that the jihadist militia was a “[big chunk](#)” of the anti-Assad opposition, as he put it in his own words. During that interview, journalist Mehdi Hasan **not only elicited from him that the CIA had played a coordinating role in this vast arms trade, but also that US involvement in this shadow war had been [much greater](#) than we thought**.

According to the [Washington Post](#), it was **one of the CIA’s “largest covert operations” in its history**. In January 2016, the *New York Times* [confirmed this](#), noting that the CIA’s maneuvers to overthrow Assad were part of a multinational campaign involving [billions of petrodollars](#) from the Gulf states, [mainly spent](#) by Saudi Arabia.

It must be understood that this secret war ushered in, between 2011 and 2017, [close cooperation](#) between Western secret services and their Turkish and Middle Eastern counterparts. Thus, many experts and journalists were making a

mistake by analyzing the operations of the various Middle Eastern powers in isolation from those of the Western governments. On the contrary, as the former Qatari Prime Minister admitted in 2017, it was a [joint and coordinated](#) operation involving [all of those](#) intelligence services.

Due to the record number of public and private funders backing this campaign, and the tens of thousands of anti-Assad mujaheddin who were directly or indirectly aided by the CIA and its allies, I believe this could be the most massive clandestine operation in the history of the Agency. However, I have not been able to determine that with certainty due to the secrecy of this [shadow war](#), which prevents access to archives and severely limits the quantity of leaks to the press.

The fact remains, however, that I was able to assemble in [my book](#) hundreds of undisputed sources which combine to corroborate my writing. In this book, internationally renowned researchers such as [Joshua Landis](#) and [Christopher Davidson](#) support my arguments, which I developed after a long investigation that I launched in 2014. Once again, I invite your readers to consult the evidence cited in my book, as it is overwhelming. I would take this opportunity to point out that Bashar al-Assad and his allies [have committed major abuses](#) against Syrian civilians, and that my book is not intended to excuse what they are responsible for.

Nevertheless, and to date, **the Western media have focused mainly on the crimes of Assad and his supporters, while suppressing or downplaying the [vast shadow war](#)** launched by the CIA and its partners in the [fall of 2011](#).

ER: What role did France play in these jihadist militias in Syria? Did it unambiguously support members of the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda?

MC: Operation *Timber Sycamore* is a clandestine operation, and such campaigns are not [owned up](#) to by those sponsoring them — at least, not typically. In this case, however, **the operation has become one of such magnitude over time that Western powers have had to communicate something about it, albeit misleadingly.** That is to say, succor to jihadist groups has long been described by Western government spokesmen as “[non-lethal support](#)” for so-called “[moderate](#)” rebels, yet the reality on the ground is that the “[moderate rebel force](#)” that is the Free Syria Army (FSA) has served as a pool of [fighters, weapons and ammunition](#) for the anti-Assad jihadist nebula, whose tacticians and militiamen were much more effective than the FSA itself.

As I explain in my book, the FSA has been [dependent](#) on jihadist groups, first and foremost [al-Nusra Front](#), and [vice versa](#). Other factions of the FSA were completely put out of action by the jihadists, their arsenals being looted by the Islamist militias, including the Islamic Front in [December 2013](#). At the very least, it is clear that the FSA as a disunited and complex bundle of anti-Assad armed groups was supported by Western powers as it fought shoulder to shoulder with jihadist groups, including with what later became Daesh, until the [winter of 2013-2014](#).

In [January 2014](#), the first major fighting erupted between Daesh and other rebel groups, including al-Nusra Front. It must be emphasized that, until their split in April 2013, al-Nusra Front and the soon-to-be-called “Islamic State” formed [a single entity](#). More specifically, the founder of al-Nusra was sent to Syria in [August 2011](#) by the leader of the future Daesh, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to fight Assad’s troops.

However, between 2012 and 2014, **it is beyond question that al-Nusra was the [driving force](#) of the rebellion in Syria**, its tacticians developing major operations that allowed the conquest of various territories by the “Islamic State”, such as [Camp Yarmouk](#) south of Damascus, [Raqqa](#), or [Deir ez-Zor](#). In summary, the combined operations of the FSA and al-Nusra **enabled the nascent Daesh to then establish itself in many Syrian cities following [the split](#) between al-Nusra and the “Islamic State”**.

It should be noted that, through the FSA, al-Nusra had been enjoying CIA and MI6 support since [early 2012](#), but it is unclear precisely when the French DGSE started becoming involved in this operation. According to François Hollande, the “moderate rebels” of the FSA were in receipt of French lethal support from the [end of 2012](#), in violation of the EU arms embargo on Syria, which was only lifted in [May 2013](#). That same year, Colonel Oqaidi, the commander of the FSA, said to camera that his relationship with Daesh was “[good, and even brotherly](#)”... And, as revealed during my investigation, Obama’s then ambassador to Syria, Robert S. Ford, telephoned Colonel Oqaidi to condemn the FSA’s persistent collaboration with al-Nusra.

At the time, and since at least the [fall of 2012](#), **the French intelligence services were alerting their government to the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadist groups such as al-Nusra were the driving forces of the anti-Assad rebellion**. Despite these alarming surges in theater, Paris, London and Washington resolved to persist in their support for the anti-Assad rebellion, secure in the [assurances](#) being given them by their allies in the Gulf that Assad would be toppled quickly and that these groups would not be a problem after the fall of the Syrian government. Both these predictions turned out to be wrong, and the most brutal jihadist group in the Levant struck France directly on November 13th, 2015.

ER: To be clear: In your opinion, **France abetted a clandestine operation by supporting entities that then organized attacks in France?**

MC: As I explain in my book, the French state and its key Western allies did not *directly* support Daesh, but they oversaw a system that massively fueled what I call the anti-Assad jihadist nebula, of which the haplessly-named “Islamic State” on Syrian territory was an [outgrowth](#) and a [driving force](#). I do not think that the French state or its allies, in carrying out this operation, ever imagined that Daesh would end up attacking Paris on November 13th, 2015.

On the other hand, it is clear that [our government](#) and its [British](#), [American](#) and [Israeli](#) allies were consciously arming jihadist groups. In France, some parliamentarians of the [PS](#), [LR](#) and [LS](#) parties confirmed to me

that the DGSE was involved in supporting groups that were not as “moderate” as they were being presented to us in the media. I would go even further, and this is one of the main arguments that I develop in my book: **by arming and supporting the FSA in various ways, the Western powers encouraged the rise of what then became the “Islamic State”**, which fought “[hand in glove](#)” with the FSA from the beginning of 2012 to the winter of 2013–2014. From the time of the break between the FSA and Islamic State in January 2014 onward, the FSA and al-Nusra maintained a [fusional relationship](#), both against the Assad forces and against Daesh.

Yet in August 2014, François Hollande acknowledged that French support for the FSA was continuing. Was he unaware of the close ties between the FSA and al-Nusra? If so, such a level of misinformation at the top of the government would be alarming. Nevertheless, in view of the [available evidence](#), it is more likely that **French leaders under the Hollande presidency were fully aware of the fact that al-Nusra was inextricably linked to the FSA.**

Moreover, in a book that was never contested in litigation by the then French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, journalists Georges Malbrunot and Christian Chesnot claimed that the head of our diplomacy knew full well that Saudi Arabia and Qatar were [infiltrating](#) into al-Nusra’s private funding networks “**paid agents, professional trainers, known to DGSE officers**”. Despite this, according to Chesnot and Malbrunot, Fabius was complaining that the Syrian state and its armed forces were not being “[hit hard enough \[and\] not strongly enough](#)”.

ER: Speaking of Laurent Fabius, why does his name feature in the Lafarge affair? Is there any evidence that he endorsed a financial agreement between that French company and Daesh?

MC: Given his active stance on the Syria dossier, it is inevitable that his name pops up in the Lafarge affair. What’s more, there are even acronyms in it familiar to the French: [DGSJ](#) (the Directorate General for Internal Security), [DRM](#) (French Military Intelligence Directorate), [DGSE](#), and so on.

Let’s be clear: the Jalabiya cement factory, constructed by Lafarge in 2010, was transformed during the war **into a “bridgehead” for the French intelligence services**: that is to say, for the [Élysée](#) [President’s office], the [Quai d’Orsay](#) [French Foreign Ministry] and all the other ministries concerned. Indeed, as journalist [Guillaume Dasquié](#) has proved, “*the documents in the case, the testimonies of the few insiders and the documents to which the JDD [the Journal du Dimanche Sunday paper] had access reconstruct a different story [than that put forward by the French authorities.] [...] This directly implicates the command in charge of counter-terrorism, the DGSJ, the Quai d’Orsay, and the external intelligence services of the DGSE. It spells out for us an improbable war-zone game of chess between industrialists, spies and diplomats, with everyone taking advantage of the presence of the others to advance his pawns, at a time when the Islamic State had not yet committed an attack on French soil.*”

Laurent Fabius said in front of the investigative magistrates that he had [not been aware](#) of Lafarge's actions in paying out cash to various local jihadist groups, including the ineptly-named "Islamic State" — an explanation that failed to convince some experts on the issue, including [Georges Malbrunot](#). **This is all the more eyebrow-raising since it has now become apparent that the French Military Intelligence Directorate was [monitoring](#) transactions between Lafarge and the various armed groups in the field.**

So I return to my previous explanation: **a clandestine operation is mounted in such a way that its sponsors have deniability of all knowledge of, as well as their role in, any maneuver of this type.** It is now clear that the DGSE has been involved since [at least 2012](#) in supporting the nebula of armed groups opposing Bashar al-Assad.

As we also know, Laurent Fabius was the most active of Hollande's ministers on the Syria dossier, acting in the interests of a [fickle "Sunni diplomacy"](#) that put our trade relations with Saudi Arabia first — the [main state funder](#) of *Timber Sycamore*. Consequently, it is impossible that the [Quai d'Orsay](#) could have been unaware of Lafarge's actions in Syria, which were part of several intelligence or destabilization operations carried out by the French secret services in that country. Renowned researcher Fabrice Balanche is of the [same opinion](#) on this as Guillaume Dasquié or Georges Malbrunot.

ER: On account of what interests might Laurent Fabius have allowed the DGSE to support islamists? Was he acting on behalf of the Saudis, as this same Georges Malbrunot and his co-author Christian Chesnot suggest in their book, *Nos très chers émirs* [*Our Dearest Emirs*]?

MC: First of all, it should be pointed out that the French President is supposed to be the one who sponsors, as a last resort, a clandestine operation. However, he enjoys legal impunity in the exercise of his mandate, which is not the case for any of his ministers.

During the Hollande presidency, we witnessed a blatant tendency for the French state to support and protect its Gulf allies. This policy materialized not only in Fabius' [hard line](#) against Iran in the nuclear deal negotiations, but also, and much more seriously, in the shifty operations that aimed to shore up the disastrous interventions of the Saudis and their partners in [Yemen](#) and [in Syria](#). This approach favorable to the Saudi monarchy was maintained under the Macron presidency, yet with a pro-Qatar instinct which became [evident](#) in the aftermath of the [Gulf crisis](#) that has set that emirate against Riyadh and Abu Dhabi since 2017.

But until then, Saudi Arabia was expressly supported by the French state, owing to the economic and strategic interdependencies that are at stake between Paris and Riyadh. Consequently, and in the interests of this notorious "[Sunni diplomacy](#)", the French state has not only turned [a blind eye](#) to the suspicious deeds of Saudi Arabia in Syria and Yemen; it has directly [supported](#) Saudi [campaigns](#), in the most discreet way possible.

These maneuvers have led to a literally schizophrenic political stance, whereby in fact the French state trumpets its operations against terrorism whenever it can, but further down at the level of the directorate and the intelligence services, strategies that have the specific effect of bolstering jihadist groups are being illegally imposed on some countries, such as [Syria](#), [Yemen](#) or [Libya](#).

In the case of that latter Libyan operation, an anonymous DGSE officer [revealed](#) to our colleagues at Canal+ TV station that **he had been ordered, in February 2011, to destabilize Benghazi in coordination with the Qatari intelligence services, notorious supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, who at that time were dominating the Libyan jihadist nebula.**

According to the reporter François de Labarre, this policy was then challenged by the French Ministry of Defense under Jean-Yves Le Drian, who used the DGSE to [support](#) General Haftar against Islamist armed groups. However, it is difficult to explain why the Quai d'Orsay [French Foreign Ministry] **continued to support Abdelhakim Belhadj, one of the founders of al-Qaeda in Libya, who was appointed military commander of Tripoli in August 2011.**

It should be noted that Belhadj is [Qatar's man](#) in Libya, and that he is one of the most influential figures of the [Muslim Brotherhood](#) in that country. According to François de Labarre, President Hollande was unable to [decide between](#) the Defense Ministry's pro-Haftar line and the pro-Belhadj policy — that is, pro-Qatar and pro-Muslim Brotherhood — which the Quai d'Orsay was adhering to. One is left wondering, therefore, whether François Hollande was able to arbitrate France's foreign policy. In any case, one can be worried about the schizophrenia that this implies. Indeed, this can lead to operations against jihadist groups initially [backed](#) by our [intelligence services](#) and their allies — operations that are [deadly](#) in effect upon civilians.

In October 2018, *Paris Match* magazine co-editor Régis Le Sommier interviewed Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. On that occasion, Lavrov [revealed](#) a shocking conversation between Laurent Fabius and himself: *“Some time after the bombings of Libya, Laurent Fabius, [then] Minister of Foreign Affairs, had called me. According to [the Malian capital] Bamako, mujaheddin from northern Mali were nearing the French contingent's positions. France intended to stop them by gaining the approval of the Security Council, and I was in favor. I told Laurent Fabius: ‘You surely understand that you are now going to face the same guys you armed in Libya.’ He chuckled and said to me, ‘C'est la vie’.”* Lavrov's comments were not denied by Laurent Fabius, so this type of flippancy in the face of the consequences of French foreign policy towards terrorist groups — and thus of the populations they threaten — is alarming.

The same is true of the Syrian dossier, which led our leaders to support for nearly five years a Free Syrian Army of which they [could not](#) ignore its [close ties](#) with al-Nusra since 2012, including when that Syrian branch of al-Qaeda and the ineptly-named “Islamic State” were [a single entity](#).

ER: Should an investigation into this be opened by the counter-terrorist section of the Paris prosecutor's office?

MC: Initially, I became interested in France's clandestine actions in Syria in the spring of 2014. At the time, parliamentarian and former counter-terrorist judge Alain Marsaud was claiming in the media that our government had previously [supported](#) and [infiltrated](#) the al-Nusra Front.

The following year, he revealed to me that the president-supporting majority under François Hollande had refused any [parliamentary inquiry](#) on this issue **so as not to “uncover such collaboration with a terrorist group”**, to quote his remarks. It should be noted again that several parliamentarians, including [Claude Goasguen](#) (LR party), [Jacques Myard](#) (LR) and [Gérard Bapt](#) (PS party), have leveled similar accusations at the French government. On LCP [French parliamentary TV], Mr. Goasguen declared in June 2015 that the French state was helping “[al-Qaeda in Syria](#)”, then the following year Gérard Bapt [confirmed me](#) the “*clandestine support by the French state of the various Islamist movements in Syria, in view of the porosity and proximity of these allied groups in the field*”. He [added](#) that “*French support for rebels in Syria, and more generally Western support for them, continued even after the attacks on Charlie Hebdo and [the French Jewish supermarket]Hyper Cacher, though these were claimed by al-Qaeda*”.

I must say that this explanation by Gérard Bapt seems to me the most accurate: according to him, the French state has supported militias evolving within a nebula of armed groups which was in constant flux, but which indisputably had al-Nusra Front among its [driving forces](#) — as Obama's close adviser Ben Rhodes himself [acknowledged](#).

Let's not forget, either, that Claude Goasguen had [frequently warned](#) the French state on LCP against this policy of support for anti-Assad factions. Put simply, it is a safe bet that **our government will oppose by all means the opening of parliamentary and judicial investigations around the clandestine actions of the French state in Syria.**

But we are looking here at a case obviously much graver than the botched DGSE operation against the [Rainbow Warrior](#), during François Mitterrand's first term. Let us be clear: if several of our parliamentarians have publicly risen to declaim French state support of al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, it is inconceivable that they did so without having specific information to back their accusations — which were never officially denied by the government.

As taxpayers and as citizens, we should be refusing to accept that our authorities can carry out such dangerous and misguided policies on our behalf and with our tax money, but without our consent — and without our even being aware of it at the outset.

Therefore, and as I explain in [my book](#), several legal and factual arguments could justify *at least* the setting-up of a parliamentary committee of inquiry, though it seems unlikely to me that investigative magistrates will ever want to

launch investigations into such a sensitive subject. Indeed, this clandestine operation is part of the state privilege and conduct of France's foreign policy — an area in which the Executive has powers so exorbitant that it is able to support Islamist groups abroad that are officially considered enemies within our own borders.