



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on March 1, 2017

McCain Made Secret Trip to Syria to Meet U.S. Military, Anti-Assad Rebels

Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.) made a trip to northern Syria to visit U.S. military forces and Kurdish fighters and to discuss the campaign for defeating the Islamic State (ISIS), his office said on February 22.

The news of McCain's trip to Syria was broken by the *Wall Street Journal* in a February 22 report that cited unnamed officials.

Another report from CNN the next day quoted Julie Tarallo, a spokeswoman for McCain, who said he made the official but unannounced visit to northern Syria as the military's campaign to take ISIS' de facto capital in Raqqa unfolds.

"Senator McCain traveled to northern Syria last week to visit U.S. forces deployed there and to discuss the counter-ISIL campaign and ongoing operations to retake Raqqa," Tarallo said, using the term for ISIS that began with the Obama administration.

McCain's office said his visit to Syria was an opportunity "to assess dynamic conditions on the ground" there and also praised President Trump for requesting a review of the U.S. strategy to defeat ISIS.

Raqqa was captured by ISIS in 2013 and the terrorist organization went on to make the city its headquarters in Syria in 2014.

CNN noted that McCain — who has a long history as an interventionist on U.S. foreign policy — has argued for more aggressive military involvement in the Syrian civil war.

This was McCain's first visit to Syria since 2013. A CNN report back on May 27th, 2013 cited a statement from McCain's communications director that he had visited with anti-Assad "rebels" in Syria. The report noted that While in Syria, McCain met with General Salem Idris, the leader of the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army.

The support that McCain gave to the Free Syrian Army by means of his visit was problematic, however. A report from Breitbart on July 8, 2014 noted that several factions within the "moderate" rebel army may not have been so moderate after all. It observed:

Reports coming out of eastern Syria Monday revealed that several factions within the Syrian opposition force known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) have pledged services to the Islamic State, the group formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Sources and eyewitnesses [said](#) that the FSA has handed over its weapons to the Islamic State in large numbers.

The Free Syrian Army was said to be a "moderate" and "secular" force, which was used as the rationale by U.S. officials to supply the opposition force with weapons and training.





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Sources told *Homs*, Syria-based Zaman Alwasl newspaper that several factions within the FSA, including Ahl Al Athar, Ibin al-Qa'im, and Aisha have pledged to support the Islamic State.

The report noted that the Obama administration had delivered weapons, supplies, and CIA-sponsored training to the Free Syrian Army.

The New American posted an [article on May 25, 2013](#) that summarized the objections expressed by Senator Rand Paul (R-Ky.) during a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to discuss sending arms to the Syrian rebels. Senators Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) and Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) had co-sponsored a bill that authorized "critical support to the Syrian opposition through provision of military assistance, training, and additional humanitarian support."

Paul had offered two amendments to the bill — one that would have forbidden the transfer of weapons to the rebel forces fighting to oust the government of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, and another that would have prevented the use of U.S. military armed forces in Syria. But both of Paul's amendments were rejected and the bill sailed through the committee, passing with bipartisan support by a vote of 15-3.

Paul said afterwards that it is "a mistake to arm" vetted Syrian rebels to counter the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

"It's a mistake to arm them. Most of the arms we've given to the so-called moderate rebels have wound up in the hands of ISIS, because ISIS simply takes it from them, or it's given to them, or we mistakenly actually give it to some of the radicals," Paul said on CBS's *This Morning*.

In 2013 McCain applauded the Obama administration for providing weapons to the Syrian rebels attempting to topple the regime of Bashar al-Assad, but said that provided arms was not enough.

An ABC News report in June 2013 reported:

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) who has been vocal on the need for more U.S. action against the Assad regime, praised the finding by the government [regarding the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime] and pressed Obama to offer "lethal assistance" to rebel forces.

"But providing arms alone is not sufficient," said McCain in a joint statement with Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) "That alone is not enough to change the military balance of power on the ground against Assad. The president must rally an international coalition to take military actions to degrade Assad's ability to use air power and ballistic missiles and to move and resupply his forces around the battlefield by air. This can be done, as we have said many times, using stand-off weapons such as cruise missiles."

"We cannot afford to delay any longer," the senators added.

"Assad is on the offensive with every weapon in his arsenal and with the complete support of his foreign allies. We must take more decisive actions now to turn the tide of the conflict in Syria."

"Every bone in my body knows that simply providing weapons will not change the battlefield equation and we must change the battlefield equation," McCain later added on the Senate floor.

"Otherwise, you are going to see a regional conflict the consequences of which we will be paying for a long, long time."

McCain's eagerness to go to war against Assad is reminiscent of the charges that former President George W. Bush made as he built a case for invading Iraq to depose then-strongman Saddam Hussein.



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Much of Bush's case was built on unsubstantiated information that Saddam Hussein's regime had weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

Bush addressed the nation from the Oval Office on March 19, 2003, to announce the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, stating:

"The people of the United States and our friends and allies will not live at the mercy of an outlaw regime that threatens the peace with weapons of mass murder."

McCain was a supporter of the invasion of Iraq. In remarks in the Senate on March 19, 2003, he stated, in part:

Madam [Senate] President, there is one thing I am sure of, that we will find the Iraqi people have been the victims of an incredible level of brutalization, terror, murder, and every other kind of disgraceful and distasteful oppression on the part of Saddam Hussein's regime....

So I respectfully disagree with the remarks of the Senator from West Virginia [Robert Byrd]. I believe the President of the United States has done everything necessary and has exercised every option short of war, which has led us to the point we are today.

I believe that, obviously, we will remove a threat to America's national security because we will find there are still massive amounts of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

However, after the invasion, the "Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq," which was released on July 9, 2004, found that many of the Bush administration's pre-war statements about Iraqi WMD were not supported by the underlying intelligence.

Following the removal of Saddam, the power vacuum in Iraq created fertile territory for the rise of ISIS. After seizing a large portion of Iraq, ISIS then turned its attention to Syria, where it sought to establish an Islamic state. It joined forces with many of the rebel forces supported by the United States that were trying to overthrow Assad.

The negative fallout that inevitably results from our nation's interventionist foreign policy and commitment to "regime change" is a lesson that McCain, during his long career in government, seems never to have learned, however. An [article in *The New American*](#) in 2014 ("Obama's "Anti-ISIS" Coalition Built ISIS, Biden Admits") cited statements made by former Vice President Joe Biden at a speech delivered at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government that confirmed a truth that the writer said has long been accepted among credible analysts: Despite all of former President Obama's rhetoric, there is no such thing as a "moderate" force in Syria that the White House claims to have been supporting against Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad.

Among the most revealing points quoted in the article was Biden's admission:

The fact is, the ability to identify a moderate middle in Syria, um, was, uh — there was no moderate middle. What my constant cry was, that our biggest problem was our allies — our allies in the region were our largest problem ... they were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war....

They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens, thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad; except that the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and Al Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world.



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Biden neglected to mention the role of the CIA and the U.S. State Department in the process, a role that was just as key as the role of “our allies.”

McCain is a bipartisan interventionist, however. Whether the occupant of the oval office is a Democrat such as Obama or a Republican such as Bush or Trump, he has never met an incursion into a foreign nation that he didn’t like. While he did criticize Trump for calling the recent Navy SEAL operation in Yemen a “success,” that criticism was based on the fact that the operation resulted in the loss of a Navy SEAL and an aircraft, not on the fact that we had intervened there. Back in 2015, McCain and Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) both said that an increase in the U.S. presence in Yemen might be necessary to stop Iranian influence in the country.

McCain said at the time that “Iran is on the march in Yemen.”

There is one further aspect of McCain’s recent visit to Syria that we should consider. That is whether or not McCain’s action constituted a violation of the Logan Act. As was noted in a [recent article posted by The New American](#), the largely unknown Logan Act, which was passed more than 200 years ago, is a federal statute that makes it a crime for Americans to seek to influence the policies of foreign governments without official permission from U.S. authorities.

The Logan Act reads: “Any citizen of the United States, wherever he may be, who, without authority of the United States, directly or indirectly commences or carries on any correspondence or intercourse with any foreign government or any officer or agent thereof, with intent to influence the measures or conduct of any foreign government or of any officer or agent thereof, in relation to any disputes or controversies with the United States, or to defeat the measures of the United States, shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than three years, or both.”

Although no American has ever been prosecuted under the Logan Act, accusations fueled by the media that he was in violation of the law was named as a factor forcing Trump’s national security advisor, Lt. General Michael Flynn, to resign after serving just 24 days in that position.

Having served in the Senate since 1987 and running as the Republican Party’s candidate for the presidency in 2008, McCain is a well-entrenched Washington insider who has most likely built up a political immunity to the forces that drove Flynn from his position. His possible violation of the Logan Act is nevertheless an interesting point to ponder.

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