



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on October 15, 2012

Most Arms Shipments to Syria Go to Jihadists

Both classified documents and background  statements by American and Middle Eastern officials confirm that most of the weapons sent to rebel forces in Syria are going to Islamic jihadists, according to a [report](#) in Monday's *New York Times*.

The jihadist elements among the forces fighting to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad have raised doubts about the U.S. role of providing intelligence and logistics support for arms shipments to Syrian rebels, arranged by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Washington's goal has been to help secular democratic groups overthrow the dictatorial regime and establish a democratic government friendly to the United States and its allies. Instead, the supply of arms may be "sowing the seeds of future insurgencies hostile to the United States," the *Times* noted.

Such a development would hardly be novel. During the 1980s, the United States supplied weapons to Saddam Hussein and to Afghans battling the Soviet invaders of their land. Then Saddam became the menace to be driven out of Kuwait and later Baghdad, while the anti-Soviet freedom fighters became the anti-Western terrorists in Afghanistan.

News of a misdirected effort in Syria could become embarrassing for the Obama administration and for the president's reelection campaign on the eve of Tuesday night's townhall debate at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. The president needs a strong performance to compensate for his generally lackluster showing in the September 27 debate in Denver. And in what remains a weak economy, he has been relying increasingly on his stewardship of foreign policy and success in fighting al-Qaeda terrorists as a selling point for his reelection. But the deadly September 11 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, the invasion of the embassy grounds and desecration of the American flag in Cairo, and anti-American, flag-burning demonstrations in other parts of the Middle East have taken some of the luster off Obama's record as the slayer of Osama bin Laden.

On the other hand, it's not clear whether or how Republican challenger Mitt Romney would make sure arms sent to Syria end up in the right hands. In his foreign policy address at the Virginia Military Institute on October 8, Romney pledged to make sure that the weapons needed by anti-government forces "to defeat Assad's tanks, helicopter's and fighter jets" would go to those "who share our values." But he did not say he would have the United States supply arms directly, and aides later said he would leave that to America's allies in the region. That appears to give little distinction between what Romney is recommending and what Obama is already doing.

The only thing that seems clear from reports of the fighting in Syria is that no one has a clear idea of what kind of government might follow an overthrow of the Assad regime or who would be in charge of it. The Saudis and Qataris and their intermediaries, including some from Lebanon, are also having a difficult time identifying the players in the uprising and sorting out the jihadists from the secular warriors among the forces aligned against Assad.

"We're trying to improve the process," an Arab official told the *Times*. "It is a very complex situation in Syria, but we are learning."



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