



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on September 13, 2013

Proponent of U.S. Help for “Moderate” Syrian Rebels Fired for Lying About Ph.D.

Questionable claims that most of the rebels in Syria’s civil war are “moderates” didn’t do 26-year-old Elizabeth O’Bagy’s career any damage. Quite the contrary: They were cited by high-ranking politicians as justification for greater U.S. involvement in the war.

What nipped O’Bagy’s career as an interventionist mouthpiece in the bud was an easily disproven falsehood about her academic credentials. Her primary employer, the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), sacked her Wednesday when it emerged that she had lied about having received a doctorate from Georgetown University.



The neoconservative think tank’s online biography of O’Bagy was replaced with the following statement: “The Institute for the Study of War has learned and confirmed that, contrary to her representations, Ms. Elizabeth O’Bagy does not in fact have a Ph.D. degree from Georgetown University. ISW has accordingly terminated Ms. O’Bagy’s employment, effective immediately.”

O’Bagy told [Politico](#) on Monday that she was in a joint master’s and doctorate program in Arab Studies and Political Science at Georgetown and that “she had submitted and defended her dissertation and was waiting for Georgetown University to confer her degree.” The university, however, said that she “received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 2009 and a Master of Arts degree in 2013” but that “at this time she is not a registered student.”

O’Bagy started her career at ISW as an intern, getting a leg up on others because of her fluency in Arabic at a time when the institute was looking for ways to make the case for U.S. intervention in Syria. She was hired as an analyst in 2012 and indicated at that time that she was working toward her Ph.D. at Georgetown.

ISW founder and president Kimberly Kagan told *Politico* that O’Bagy “misrepresented to me in May that she had successfully defended her dissertation.” Subsequently, Kagan said, she began referring to the analyst as Dr. O’Bagy in internal communications, and O’Bagy’s biography on the institute’s website was updated to reflect this understanding later in the summer.

As it turns out, however, O’Bagy actually “failed her defense” of her dissertation, Kagan told *Politico*; and that is why she was terminated.

O’Bagy’s dismissal is significant because she has been one of the most prominent exponents of the notion that the Syrian rebels are mostly moderates, not Islamic extremists.

In a March [ISW report](#) she claimed: “The opposition movement in Syria has been fragmented from its inception, a direct reflection of Syria’s social complexity and the decentralized grassroots of the



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uprising. This condition has plagued Syria's armed opposition since peaceful protestors took up arms and began forming rebel groups under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in the summer of 2011."

Even more significantly, she authored an August 30 [Wall Street Journal](#) op-ed that both Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Secretary of State John Kerry cited as evidence that U.S. intervention on the side of the rebels would not benefit al-Qaeda.

"Contrary to many media accounts, the war in Syria is not being waged entirely, or even predominantly, by dangerous Islamists and al-Qaeda die-hards," O'Bagy wrote.

"Moderate opposition forces — a collection of groups known as the Free Syrian Army — continue to lead the fight against the Syrian regime" and "make up the majority of actual fighting forces," she asserted.

She called for increased U.S. involvement in the war as "part of a larger, comprehensive strategy coordinated with our allies that has the ultimate goal of destroying [Syrian President Bashar al-]Assad's military capability while simultaneously empowering the moderate opposition with robust support, including providing them with anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapon systems." The United States, she averred, could not stand idly by; it must intervene sooner or later, preferably sooner. (Despite such statements, O'Bagy told *Politico* that she's "not advocating the United States [sic] start a war or get in the middle of one.")

Kerry recommended O'Bagy's piece to lawmakers during testimony in both houses of Congress last week, telling them that the Syrian rebels are moderates, not extremists.

"The opposition," he told Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.), "has increasingly become more defined by its moderation, more defined by the breadth of its membership and more defined by its adherence to an all-inclusive, minority-protecting constitution, which will be broad-based and secular."

McCain, ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, also referred to O'Bagy's work and even traveled with her to Syria in May to meet the alleged moderates in the Free Syrian Army. Among those he met and with whom he was photographed were "radicals ... accused of kidnapping Lebanese pilgrims from a village in Aleppo province," according to [The New American](#).

Kerry, McCain, and O'Bagy are clearly in the minority when it comes to their view of the Syrian opposition forces. A wide variety of media outlets, including [The New American](#), [Reuters](#), and the [New York Times](#), have reported that many of the rebels are aligned with al-Qaeda, wish to impose sharia law on Syria, and have committed numerous atrocities.

One of the powerful rebel factions, al-Nusra, was designated a terror organization by the U.S. State Department in December — over O'Bagy's objections. "I'm not saying they aren't a terrorist group," O'Bagy told [McClatchy Newspapers](#) at the time. "But given the circumstances and given their cooperation with the opposition as a whole, designating them now would be disastrous."

Four months later, the group pledged loyalty to al-Qaeda.

Despite the obvious flaws in her claims about the Syrian rebels, O'Bagy's continual flogging for U.S. backing for them makes perfect sense in light of the fact that she is the [political director](#) for the Syrian Emergency Task Force (SETF), a pro-rebellion organization that by its own [admission](#) "continues to advocate for greater U.S. action in Syria."

O'Bagy appears to have fudged on this significant morsel of information, too. Her *Journal* op-ed



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originally noted only her position at ISW. After the [Daily Caller](#) highlighted O'Bagy's connection to SETF, the newspaper added this "clarification" to the end of her bio: "In addition to her role at the Institute for the Study of War, Ms. O'Bagy is affiliated with the Syrian Emergency Task Force, a nonprofit operating as a 501(c)(3) pending IRS approval that subcontracts with the U.S. and British governments to provide aid to the Syrian opposition."

Yes, you read that correctly: SETF gets cash from the U.S. government, specifically from the State Department and related contractors, so it can lobby the government for even more assistance. "The U.S. government has spent over a [sic] \$1 billion on aid to the Syrian rebels, with nearly half going to the Department of State," according to the [Daily Caller](#), proving that the United States has hardly been a passive observer of the carnage in that country.

Notwithstanding this clear conflict of interest on O'Bagy's part and the mountain of evidence that her claims of "moderate" rebels are greatly overblown, ISW president Kagan told *Politico* "she stands by O'Bagy's work on Syria."

"Everything I've looked at is rock solid," Kagan said. "Every thread that we have pulled upon has been verified through multiple sources."

To the neocons, it seems, deceiving the public into supporting U.S. military adventurism is perfectly acceptable. Lying to neocons about one's academic credentials, on the other hand, is not.

Photo is of members of the Free Syrian Army



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