

A rare moment of truth on the US support for Al Qaeda

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There was a rare moment of truth during Tuesday night's Democratic presidential debate. Representative Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii, an Iraq war veteran, said that while Trump had Kurdish blood on his hands, "so do many of the politicians in our country from both parties who have supported this ongoing regime-change war in Syria that started in 2011, along with many in the mainstream media, who have been championing and cheerleading this regime-change war."

This was directed not only against the Obama-Biden administration, which began the US covert intervention in Syria, but against the *New York Times* and CNN, the co-sponsors of the debate, who have been among the most strident in denouncing Trump's order to withdraw from Syria. (See *The Democrats support the "Forever War"*)

Gabbard continued, "As president, I will end these regime-change wars by doing two things, ending the draconian sanctions that are really a modern-day siege, the likes of which we are seeing Saudi Arabia wage against Yemen, that have caused tens of thousands of Syrian civilians to die and to starve, and I would make sure that we stop supporting terrorists like Al Qaeda in Syria who have been the ground force in this ongoing regime-change war."

This remarkable admission that American imperialism was allied in Syria with Al Qaeda—the supposed main enemy in the "war on terror" now nearly 20 years old—was passed over in silence by the three media "moderators," two from CNN and one from the *Times*, and by the other eleven candidates.

South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg, a military intelligence veteran of the Afghanistan war, tried to rebut Gabbard's claim that Syria was a US-backed "regime-change" war. He reiterated the conventional presentation of the war as a struggle to defend civilians

from the brutality of the government of President Bashar al-Assad, while not acknowledging that Washington and its allies among the Gulf sheikdoms had funneled money, weapons and Islamist gunmen for years in an effort to put a stooge regime into power in Damascus.

Gabbard responded, "So, really, what you're saying, Mayor Pete, is that you would continue to support having U.S. troops in Syria for an indefinite period of time to continue this regime-change war that has caused so many refugees to flee Syria, that you would continue to have our country involved in a war that has undermined our national security, you would continue this policy of the U.S. actually providing arms in support to terrorist groups in Syria, like Al Qaeda, HTS, al-Nusra and others, because they are the ones who have been the ground force in this regime change war? That's really what you're saying?"

Buttigieg had no answer on the facts, merely declaring that Gabbard was advocating the same policy in Syria as Donald Trump. As for the corporate media, there was virtually no mention of Gabbard's charge of a US-Al Qaeda alliance in Syria, and no attempt to refute it. Even to discuss that connection would call into question the entire foreign policy of American imperialism in the Middle East.

Gabbard is neither a pacifist nor an opponent of imperialism, but a serving military officer in the Army Reserve who did two tours of duty in Iraq, including in 2005 at the height of the war, and took several weeks off from the campaign in August for a unit training exercise in Indonesia—part of the US preparations for a future war with China.

"In short, when it comes to the war against terrorists, I'm a hawk," Gabbard told the *Hawaii Tribune-Herald* in 2016. "When it comes to counterproductive wars of

regime change, I'm a dove.”

Her views tend towards outright Islamophobia. She criticized the Obama administration for refusing to use the term “Islamic radical terrorism” to describe Al Qaeda, along the lines of ultra-right operatives like Steve Bannon, Trump’s onetime political counselor and former campaign manager. Bannon invited her to the White House where she met Trump early in 2017, one of the first congressional Democrats to do so. She later travelled to Syria and had a face-to-face meeting with President Bashar al-Assad.

While she describes herself as a convert to Hinduism, and has praised the Hindu chauvinist Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, Gabbard’s connection to that religion is actually tenuous. As described in a long profile in *New York* magazine, her father joined an offshoot of the Hare Krishna sect founded by an American guru named Chris Butler. People raised in this sect include Gabbard’s family, both her first and second husband, and her congressional chief of staff. Gabbard’s father is currently a Hawaii state senator, elected on a program of liberal environmentalism and anti-gay bigotry. Gabbard only shifted her position on gay marriage after several years in the state legislature.

None of this affects the truth of what Gabbard said about the US intervention in Syria, or the utilization of Al Qaeda forces in Syria as the ground troops for American imperialism’s regime-change war.



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