



Jessica Ashooh: The Taming of Reddit and the National Security State Plant Tabbed to Do It

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Reddit is one of the world's most influential news and social media platforms. The website attracted over 1.2 billion visits in April 2021 alone, making it the United States' eighth most visited site, ahead of other leviathans like Twitter, Instagram and eBay. Now majority-owned by a much larger corporate publishing empire, Reddit is also far ahead of more established news sites, garnering three times the numbers of *Fox News* and five times those of *The New York Times*.

That is why it was so surprising that so little was made of the company's decision to appoint foreign policy hawk Jessica Ashooh to the position of Director of Policy in 2017, at which time it was also the eight most visited site in the U.S. Ashooh, who had been a Middle East foreign policy wonk at NATO's think tank the Atlantic Council, was appointed at around the same time that the Senate Select Intelligence Committee was demanding more control over the popular website, on the grounds that it was being used to spread disinformation. In her role as Director of Policy, she oversees all government relations and public policy for the company, in addition to managing content, product and advertising. Yet a Google search for "Jessica Ashooh Reddit" filtered between late 2016 and early 2017 (after she was appointed) elicits zero relevant results, meaning not one media outlet even mentioned the questionable appointment.

This is all the more hair-raising, given her resume as a high state official — all of which raises serious questions about the extent of collaboration between Silicon Valley and the national security state.

A hawk's talons on Syria

The Atlantic Council is the de-facto brains of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and takes funding from the military alliance, as well as from the U.S. government, the U.S. military,

Middle Eastern dictatorships, other Western governments, big tech companies, and weapons manufacturers. Its board of directors has been and continues to be a who's who of high U.S. statespeople like Henry Kissinger, Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, as well as senior military commanders such as retired generals Wesley Clark, David Petraeus, H.R. McMaster, James "Mad Dog" Mattis, the late Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft, and Admiral James Stavridis. At least seven former CIA directors are also on the board. As such, the council chooses to represent both political

Between 2015 and 2017, Ashooh was Deputy Director of the Atlantic Council's Middle East Strategy Task Force, working directly with and under Madeline Albright and Stephen Hadley. This is particularly noteworthy, given both these individuals' roles in the region. As Bill Clinton's secretary of state, Albright oversaw the Iraq sanctions and the Oil for Food Program, denounced as "genocide" by the successive United Nations diplomats charged with carrying them out. In an infamous interview with *60 Minutes*, Albright casually brushed off a question about her role in the killing of half a million children, stating "the price is worth it." Meanwhile, Hadley was deputy or senior national security advisor to the government of George W. Bush throughout the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions, surely the greatest crimes against humanity thus far in the 21st century.

Ashooh appears to be as hawkish as her bosses. Her particular area of expertise is the war in Syria, regarding which she has been among the most belligerent voices, constantly calling for more American intervention to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad. In a 2015 interview with *Al Jazeera*, she praised the U.K. government's decision to bomb the country, claiming that the British public was "coming around" to the idea of war. A shocked interviewer asked "how will the British airstrikes [on] Syria...make the British public any safer?" Ashooh replied that it was "generally a positive decision" because "it goes a long way in improving international consensus on the way forward on Syria," although she lamented that there wouldn't be "much improvement in the situation without ground troops." There will be "no political solution without a military element," she predicted, essentially making the pitch for war.

Ashooh has also constantly praised and supported Syria's opposition forces. In 2016, she said that she was very happy that "fighters on the ground from a number of key factions" were uniting against the "Assad regime." She condemned Russia for claiming these opposition forces were members of terrorist groups like Al-Nusra, Jaysh al-Islam or ISIS, insisting that these were "moderate" rebels.

Of course, the idea that there was still any measurable distance between "moderate" rebels and outright militant jihadists by 2016 was hard to maintain. Even *The Washington Post* by this time was admitting as much, noting that so-called moderates were now so "intermingled" with al-Nusra that it was difficult to tell them apart.

Nevertheless, the New Hampshire native took to the pages of *The New York Times* to demand that the U.S. arm the opposition. Of course, it was already doing so, the CIA spending \$1 billion per year fielding rebel mercenary armies in the conflict — with one in every 15 dollars the agency spent going to this endeavor. All of this Ashooh surely knew, yet she maintained that the West must continue to "jack up the price" of Russia defending Assad. "As long as [Assad] remains in power and remains the figurehead of the Syrian government...this conflict won't end," she said, laying out her regime-change-or-bust position. Just weeks before unexpectedly taking over at Reddit, Ashooh seemed to still be in full foreign-policy-hawk mode,

condemning Obama in the pages of *The Washington Post* for his apparent softness on Syria and demanding that Trump “restore U.S. credibility” by “order[ing] targeted, punitive strikes against the Assad regime.”

Dirty war, dirty warrior

Ashooh is actually even more involved in the Syrian conflict than one might realize from her hawkish opinions alone. Between 2011 and 2015, she worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates, in her own words, “[p]rovid[ing] senior decision makers with policy analysis and strategic advice, with a particular focus on Syria.”

At that time the UAE was using its enormous financial clout to arm and fund a myriad of jihadist groups attempting to overthrow the secular strongman Assad and establish some kind of Islamic state. Far from a conspiracy theory, this comes straight from the horse’s mouth, as then-Vice President Joe Biden revealed in a Q&A session in 2014. The future president frankly stated:

The Saudis, the Emiratis, what were they doing? ... They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of 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. “

Under pressure, he later apologized for his loose lips.

MintPress News asked the Emirati Ministry of Foreign Affairs to comment on precisely what Ashooh’s role was, but they failed to respond.

Ashooh herself appears to have been a relatively major player in the Syrian Civil War. In her previously mentioned *Washington Post* article, she notes that her boss was a former Emirati Air Force General and that she was flown to Istanbul in 2013 to attend an emergency meeting with leaders of the Syrian opposition, as well as ambassadors from unnamed Arab and Western states, in order to plan a response to a reported chemical weapons attack and to help the U.S. “coordinate with the Syrian opposition.”

At the same time as she was advising the nation on Middle Eastern affairs, the UAE was widely accused of flying ISIS and al-Qaeda leaders into Yemen to help them intensify the Saudi-led onslaught on the impoverished nation and of smuggling U.S.-made weaponry — including small arms, TOW missiles and Oshkosh fighting vehicles — to the jihadist groups. While Ashooh’s writing is careful to maintain a distinction between the “moderate” rebels she supports and the fundamentalist radicals she does not, it certainly is noteworthy that the entities she worked for consistently seem to end up in league with the most regressive forces in the region. *MintPress* also reached out to Reddit for comment on why they appointed Ashooh, given her past history, and on the wider phenomenon of government penetration of social media. The company initially promised to issue a response to the inquiry but has not followed through with it.

The US-allied United Arab Emirates (UAE stands accused of flying ISIS leaders from Syria into Yemen to use in the Saudi-led Coalition war.

Opposing some dictatorships, supporting others

Regime change is on the table for more than just one Middle Eastern nation. In a 2017 [paper](#) for the Center for the National Interest — a think tank established by former Republican President Richard Nixon and the “Godfather of Neoconservatism,” [Irving Kristol](#) — Ashooh explores the different options for forcing regime change in Iran, but concludes that overthrowing the “odious regime” is an impossible task right now, and criticizes the idea as a quixotic dream.

Nevertheless, she is far from an Iran dove. An Atlantic Council [report](#) she co-wrote insists that “Iranian interference in the Arab world must be deterred,” and that “America’s friends and partners must be reassured that the U.S. opposes Iranian hegemony and will work with them to prevent it.”

Ashooh’s commitment to fighting against Middle Eastern dictatorships might seem more principled if she did not appear so enamored of the least democratic one of them all. In 2016, she accompanied Albright and Hadley to Saudi Arabia and praised the monarchy’s dynamic leadership on the economy and its nurturing of a new generation. “It was really really exciting to see that level of energy and the level of government support for these young people who were interested in shaping their own futures...it was just wonderful,” she [said](#). In an [article](#) about her experience for business news website *Market Watch*, she waxed lyrical about how forward-thinking the Saudi government is and how the country has become “a hub for the dynamic and positive change that is swelling up throughout the region.” Presumably, this excludes Yemen, a nation they were [bombing relentlessly](#). In a 2020 [interview](#), Ashooh revealed that her dream job would be U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia. One of her [earliest comments](#) on her [public Reddit page](#) (made before she began working there) is deflecting the Kingdom from criticism of its [dreadful](#) treatment of women.

As part of the Atlantic Council, Ashooh was tasked with envisaging a new Middle East for the 21st century. Given her [output](#), it seems that she advocates for a transition towards a more privatized, free-market economic setup, not completely unlike the shock therapy tried in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. “We have to “encourage states to make the reforms that move economies from state-based to ones that support entrepreneurship, because the age of state-based economies is over,” she [said](#) at a talk at New York University in 2015, adding:

You’ve got to move to support entrepreneurship in the region and let people take advantage of the natural industrial tendencies of people in the Middle East. My God, if you’ve ever been to a Turkish bazaar or a market in Cairo you know that these countries are perfectly capable of having functioning market economies. But the state has gotten in the way.

Ashooh’s [LinkedIn](#) profile also notes that in 2010, she worked as an advisor to the Iraqi Ministry of Planning “on a variety of strategic and economic development issues,” but does not go into any more detail about what those issues were. A further biography merely [states](#) that her consultancy agency “provid[ed] strategic and management consulting services to the Ministry of Planning of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Northern Iraq.” Unsurprisingly, the organization has links to the U.S. military; the agency’s lead partner [being](#) a former Army captain.

Think Tankie

Ashooh comes from a relatively prominent New Hampshire family of Lebanese descent, the most notable of which is probably her uncle [Richard](#). Richard Ashooh was Donald Trump’s

Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Export Administration and a former executive at weapons manufacturer BAE Systems. Unlike her uncle, Jessica appears to lean more Democratic, having donated money to a number of local politicians, as well as to anti-Trump Republican groups aimed at convincing them to vote blue, such as Right Side PAC and the now infamous Lincoln Project. However, she also appears to have great respect for many Republicans, having written her doctoral thesis at Oxford University on the Middle East policy of the George W. Bush administration. She also stated that the person she would have most liked to have met was 41st President George Bush Senior, describing him as possessing “incredible amounts of strategy, finesse and restraint.” Thus, her political views appear to be exactly in the center of the neoliberal “blob” in Washington.

Ashooh also worked for the right-wing think tank the CATO Institute and is a Term Member of the more Democratic-aligned Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). The CFR’s term member program is intended to, in its own words, “cultivate the next generation of foreign policy leaders.”

Surveillance Valley

How and why, then, did a hawkish young mandarin hotheaded at elite universities and in the halls of state power end up an executive at an anarchic messageboard site with an anti-establishment reputation? Virtually everyone else in senior roles at Reddit has relevant backgrounds in marketing or tech, having worked with comparable companies such as Yelp, Expedia and Snapchat.

Tom Secker — a journalist, podcaster and researcher who runs SpyCulture.com, an online archive about government involvement in the entertainment industry — was deeply skeptical. “That someone whose entire career has been in international relations and foreign affairs is now the senior policy wonk at Reddit is simply bizarre. Given her ties to the CFR, Atlantic Council and the like, it’s downright suspicious,” Secker told *MintPress*.

Underneath the surface, however, the Atlantic Council has been rapidly expanding its influence and control over big social media companies. In 2018, it announced that it would be partnering with Facebook to promote trustworthy sources and derank, demote and even delete low quality or fake news, thus effectively curating what the platform’s 2.85 billion worldwide users see in their news feeds. But the effect of recent algorithmic changes has been to throttle alternative media traffic in favor of establishment sources such as *CNN*, *Fox News* and *The New York Times*. Even such more mainstream liberal sites as *Mother Jones* have seen their numbers crater. Facebook later admitted that they were directly targeting *Mother Jones* because of its left-leaning content, raising the question that if such a middle-of-the-road liberal outlet was being penalized, wasn’t the collapse in traffic to more radical publications surely deliberate? Given the Atlantic Council’s funding and the identities of those on its board, their control over social media is tantamount to state censorship on a global level.

Earlier this year, Facebook also hired NATO press officer Ben Nimmo to be its intelligence chief, in another move that dismayed free-speech advocates. In the past, Nimmo has identified a Welsh pensioner and an internationally known Ukrainian pianist as Russian bots, raising more questions about the suitability of the Atlantic Council to be an arbiter of truth online.

The Facebook-Atlantic Council link mirrors that of Microsoft with NewsGuard, a new piece of software purportedly trying to fight fake news by placing either green shields or red warning logos, corresponding to an outlet's credibility, beside all links in its browser, Microsoft Edge — this credibility being decided entirely by NewsGuard itself. NewsGuard pushed Microsoft to install the software on all its products as standard. Again, however, NewsGuard's system rated establishment websites like *Fox News* and *CNN* as trustworthy but independent media as suspect. And again, a glance at its advisory board makes it clear that this is a state operation. Those in key positions included George W. Bush's Secretary of Homeland Security and former NSA and CIA Director General Michael Hayden; ex-White House Communications Director Don Baer; and former Secretary General of NATO Anders Fogh Rasmussen. Worse still, NewsGuard is also linked to a PR agency employed in whitewashing the Saudi government's human-rights record and its role in the carnage in Yemen.

Twitter, too, has some extremely troubling links with state power. In 2019 Gordon MacMillan, a senior Twitter executive responsible for the Middle East region, was outed as an active duty officer in the British Army's 77th Brigade, a unit dedicated to online operations and psychological warfare. Far from causing a scandal, only one major U.S. outlet even mentioned the story, and the journalist in question resigned from the profession weeks later, claiming the existence of a network of top-down state censors who quash stories that threaten the power and prestige of the national security state. To this day, MacMillan remains in his post at Twitter, strongly suggesting the social media company knew of his role before he was hired.

Over the past few years, Twitter, Reddit and Facebook have announced the deletion of hundreds of thousands of accounts linked to sources in Russia, Iran, China and other enemy states, often on the recommendation of Western governments or state-sponsored intelligence organizations. However, they never seem willing or able to find any manipulation of their platforms by Western governments. Thus, the upshot of this has been to slowly dissuade critics of Western foreign policy from using their services.

“The mainstream media-politik establishment has managed to get a hold over Twitter, Facebook and Instagram — shadow-banning and downrating posts considered ‘Russian propaganda’ or whatever other excuse they use to marginalize perspectives and content outside of the mainstream,” Secker told *MintPress*. “Audiences for this sort of content are increasingly pissed off and alienated by the major social media sites.”

Increasingly, unwelcome political voices are either brushed off by centrist pundits as repeating Russian talking points or smeared as being amplified by Kremlin-based bot farms. The popularity of movements on the left like Black Lives Matter or the Bernie Sanders' campaign were written off as partially linked to Russia, while others suggested that the January 6 insurrection in Washington was essentially a Russian operation.

The irony is that many of the wildest accusations against Putin that have fed this climate of suspicion began life in Atlantic Council documents. For example, the organization has published a series of studies that suggest that virtually every European political party challenging the neoliberal status quo in some way — from Labour and UKIP in the U.K. to Syriza and Golden Dawn in Greece and PODEMOS and Vox in Spain — are secretly controlled by Russia, functioning as the “Kremlin's Trojan Horses,” in its words.

The Atlantic Council is also deeply intertwined with a U.K. government-funded organization called the Integrity Initiative, something that purports to be a group defending democracy from disinformation. However, in practice, it appears to be doing the opposite: planting disinformation about politicians' supposed links to Russia in order to undermine them. The Integrity Initiative is a government-backed cluster of journalists who operate in unison to conduct propaganda blitzes on unsuspecting publics. In 2018, it launched a successful operation to prevent Colonel Pedro Baños being appointed Spain's head of national security. Considering Baños too soft on Russia for the Atlantic Council and other hawks' liking, the initiative sprung into action, creating a storm of protest that led to another individual being chosen.

Reddit actually played a key role in a 2019 propaganda blitz against anti-war Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. A few days before the U.K.'s general election, Corbyn promoted documents leaked on the platform that showed that Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson was negotiating with American companies, putting much of the country's National Health Service up for sale. With just days to go before polls opened, it could have proved a game changer. Reddit quickly came to Johnson's rescue, however, asserting that the documents were part of a Russian disinformation campaign. The story in the pliant British press switched from "Boris Johnson is selling off the NHS" to "Corbyn promotes Russian disinfo," thus greasing the skids for an easy victory for the hardline anti-Russia Conservative Party, an outcome the hawks at the Atlantic Council were no doubt relieved by, given Corbyn's open skepticism about war, empire and nuclear weapons. The veracity of the documents was not challenged.

For a while...

Founded in 2005, Reddit has grown to become one of the world's largest and most influential websites. However, it began life as an anarchistic messageboard whose culture was profoundly libertarian and anti-establishment. For years, the company's administrators took a near free speech absolutist position. Aaron Swartz, Reddit's co-founder, was an open source hacktivist and even attempted to download and publish the entirety of academic publisher Jstor's library. When authorities got wind of what he was doing, they threatened him with 40 years in prison, an action that caused him to take his own life in 2013.

Reddit's own position on free information and free speech was often so extreme it caused huge controversy. The site became the internet's largest source of child pornography. It was only after *CNN* began reporting on it to a nationwide audience that things began to change. Other, grossly offensive communities like /r/BeatingWomen and /r/CoonTown were also protected.

Nevertheless, the culture established by anarchistic tech bros remained for some years, with the site resembling darker corners of the internet like 4Chan and 8Chan as much as more family-friendly mainstream social media like Facebook.

Ashooh's arrival in 2017 coincided with a new era in the site's history. Gone were the days of protecting communities that would bring in bad publicity. Her team quickly brought in a new content policy and began to delete communities that violated it. Last year, she oversaw the banning of over 2,000 communities in a single day, including /r/The_Donald, the main Donald Trump subreddit, and /r/ChapoTrapHouse, the most active left-wing community. These decisions have helped the money flow in; since 2017 revenue has more than tripled.

However, what has been lost across the internet is the liberatory potential of these technologies. In the 1990s and 2000s, many predicted that the internet would usher in a new era of egalitarianism and genuine democracy, helping even to reduce barriers and tensions between nations. For a while, the new medium allowed political actors to challenge the status quo and gain huge followings quickly. Alternative media was easily outperforming legacy media, and challenging the status quo when it came to news. Seeing that, the reaction since 2016 has been swift, as the elite have moved to retighten their grip over the means of communication. Ashooh's jump from national security state official to Reddit Director of Policy is just one more point of reference on that chart.