

America's Defeat in Syria: Bashar Al Assad Still Stands, As Obama Prepares to Leave Office

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"The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way. His calls for dialogue and reform have rung hollow while he is imprisoning, torturing and slaughtering his own people. We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside" – Barack Obama, [speaking](#) in August 2011.

When the US President made his first explicit call for the removal of Bashar al-Assad from power in August 2011, who would have thought that the Syrian leader would have outlasted Barack Obama in office. Even for the most optimistic supporter of the territorial integrity of the Syrian state, there must have been moments when they felt that the US/NATO war machine would topple Assad and completely Balkanize the Syrian state (I know I did). And yet here we are, more than five years later, watching Obama conclude his shambolic reign with a final frenzy of anti-Russian attacks, as Assad still stands in Damascus.

Outside of any last gasp strike or invasion of Syria by the US or its allies, it seems that Assad's presidency will outlast that of Obama's. Despite all the media propaganda and demonization; the hordes of foreign mercenaries armed to the teeth by the US and their allies; the false flag attacks to justify a full-scale invasion of the country (the Ghouta sarin attack for instance); the sanctions against Assad and other high-level Syrian officials; and the countless other assaults on the country: the Syrian people refused to be bullied or swayed by outside powers.

Although the war is still ongoing and far from over, the recent liberation of eastern Aleppo by the Syrian Arab Army illustrates which side has the momentum in the conflict. The move led by Moscow to forge closer ties between Russia, Iran and Turkey in relation to Syria is also a significant development, considering the role that Turkey has played in supporting the opposition during the conflict. A Turkey that is committed to ending the conflict and stopping the flow of arms and mercenaries across the border is a major step towards the stabilization of Syria.

Obama vs. The US Military

The West has been unable to force Libyan-style regime change in Syria due to a variety of reasons, with the support of regional and international allies one of the most significant factors. Iran, Hezbollah, China and most notably Russia, have been crucial players in supporting the Syrian government, a fact that has been well documented in the media. What has been less well documented however, is the role that certain elements within the

US military have played in stopping the neoconservatives, the CIA and other factions close to Obama forcing regime change in Syria.

Despite many elements within the US military being far from perfect, there has been a core of high-ranking military officers who have resisted the Syrian strategy advocated by many in Washington. As the award-winning journalist, Seymour M. Hersh, wrote in his article for the London Review of Books in January 2016, titled: [Military to Military](#), numerous individuals in the US military were concerned over the nature of many of the opposition groups that would have been empowered if Assad was ousted from power, and so they began to secretly share US intelligence with other militaries around the world, intelligence that was intended to help the Syrian military in their fight against extremists:

“In the autumn of 2013, they [(the Joint Chiefs)] decided to take steps against the extremists without going through political channels, by providing US intelligence to the militaries of other nations, on the understanding that it would be passed on to the Syrian army and used against the common enemy, Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State.”

One of the individuals in the US military that has been a vocal critic of Obama’s Syrian strategy is the former Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), retired Lieutenant General Michael T. Flynn. The former DIA head has been consistently warning over the dangers of overthrowing Assad, and in 2015 he lambasted the Obama administration for taking the “[willful decision](#)” to support the rise of extremists in Syria. Flynn, who has been appointed as Trump’s National Security Adviser, is well aware of the situation on the ground in Syria, with an August 2012 intelligence document from the DIA [stating](#) that:

“The Salafists, the Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Qaeda in Iraq, are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria... Opposition forces are trying to control the Eastern areas (Hasaka and Der Zor), adjacent to the Western Iraqi provinces (Mosul and Anbar), in addition to neighbouring Turkish borders. Western countries, the Gulf states and Turkey are supporting these efforts... If the situation unravels there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist principality in Eastern Syria (Hasaka and Der Zor), and this is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want, in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of the Shia expansion (Iraq and Iran).”

Flynn was not alone in opposing the Syrian policy of the Obama administration however, although he was perhaps the most vocal in public. Retired General Martin Dempsey for instance, who served as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff between October 2011 and September 2015, was fairly consistent at emphasising the costs of military action in Syria, including during the debate over whether to directly strike Syria after the Ghouta chemical attack in August 2013. Dempsey’s general position on using overt military force in Syria against Assad can be seen in a July 2013 letter to the Chairman of the Committee on Armed Services, Senator Carl Levin. The overall tone of the letter is cautious and thoughtful, with Dempsey [warning](#) that the US “could inadvertently empower extremists” by ousting Assad:

“It is not enough to simply alter the balance of military power without careful consideration of what is necessary in order to preserve a functioning state. We must anticipate and be prepared for the unintended consequences of our

action. Should the regime's institutions collapse in the absence of a viable opposition, we could inadvertently empower extremists or unleash the very chemical weapons we seek to control... Once we take action, we should be prepared for what comes next. Deeper involvement is hard to avoid. We should also act in accordance with the law."

If Obama had got his wish in 2011, and Assad was removed from power in Damascus, the political vacuum left by Assad would have been filled by a plethora of 'moderate rebels' (i.e. hardcore terrorists). After eight years of carnage and broken promises, many people in the US and around the world will be delighted to see Obama leave office.

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