

Chilling Warnings for Syria: When Foreign Interventions Go Bad

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

The reports through Western presses read rather familiarly. Joyful residents taking selfies on abandoned, sullen tanks. Armed men ebullient and shooting into the sky with adventurist stupidity. The removal of statues and vulgar reminders of a regime. Prisoners freed; torture prisons emptied. The tyrant, deposed.

This is the scene in Syria, a war with more external backers and sponsors than causes. The terrain for some years had been rococo in complexity: Russia, Iran and Shia militants in one bolstering camp; Gulf states and Turkey pushing their own mixture of Sunni cause and disruption in another; and the US throwing in its lot behind the Kurdish backed People's Protection Units (YPG). Even this schema is simplified.

While there will be an innumerable number of those delighted at the fall of **Bashar al-Assad**, the end of the Arab socialist Baathist regime provides much rich food for thought. Already, the whitewash and publicity relations teams are doing the rounds, suggesting that we are seeing a sound, balanced group of combatants that will ensure a smooth transition to stable rule. Little thought is given to the motley collection of rebels who might, at any moment, seek retribution or turn on each other, be they members of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), or those from the largest, most noted group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

There is little mention, for instance, about the blotted resume of the aspiring usurper, **Abu Mohammad Al-Jolani**, who retains a bounty of US\$10 million for information on his whereabouts and capture by US authorities. Human rights activist and former British diplomat Craig Murray [helpfully posted a link](#) from the US embassy in Syria from 2017, with the blood red title "Stop This Terrorist". As he acidly notes, "You might want to retweet this before they delete it."

When foreign powers meddle, particularly in the Middle East, the result is very often a cure worse than the disease. The billowy rhetoric follows a template: evil dictators, oppressors of their people, finally get their just desserts at the hands of a clearly demarcated, popular insurrection, helped along, naturally, by the world's freedom lovers and democracy hailers. That those same freedom loving powers tolerated, traded and sponsored those same despots when it was convenient to do so is a matter confined to amnesia and the archives.

A few examples suffice. The scene in Libya in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 NATO intervention that overthrew Muammar al-Gaddafi saw commentary of delight, relief and hope. New prospects were in the offing, especially with the news of his brutal murder. "For four decades the Gaddafi regime ruled the Libyan people with an iron fist," [stated](#) US

President Barack Obama. “Basic human rights were denied, innocent civilians were detained, beaten and killed.” At the end of the regime, Obama confidently claimed that the new administration was “consolidating their control over the country and one of the world’s longest serving dictators is no more.”

UK **Prime Minister David Cameron** [struck the same note](#). “Today is a day to remember all of Colonel Gaddafi’s victims.” Libyans “have an even greater chance, after this news, of building themselves a strong and democratic future.” French President Nicolas Sarkozy [chose to see](#) the overthrow of Gaddafi as the result of a unified, uniform resistance from “the Libyan people” who emancipated “themselves from the dictatorial and violent regime imposed on them for more than 40 years.”

What followed was not stability, consolidation and democratic development. Jihadi fundamentalism exploded with paroxysms of zeal. The patchwork of unsupervised and anarchically disposed militia groups, aided by NATO’s intervention, got busy. Killings, torture, enforced disappearances, forced displacement and abductions became common fare. The country was nigh dismembered, fragmenting from 2014 onwards [between rival coalitions](#) backed by different foreign powers.

The same gruesome pattern could also be seen in the post-Saddam Hussein Iraq of 2003. It began with a US-led invasion based on sham premises: Weapons of Mass Destruction that were never found. It also resulted in the overthrow of another Arab socialist Baathist regime. Statues were toppled. There was much celebration and looting. Even before the invasion in March that year, US President George W. Bush was airily [declaring](#) that “a new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region.” In November 2004, Bush would dreamily [state](#) that the US and Britain “have shown our determination to help Iraqis achieve their liberty and to defend the security of the world.”

The consequences of the invasion: the effective balkanisation of Iraq aided by the banning of the Baath Party and the disbanding of the Iraqi Army; the murderous split between Sunni and Shia groups long held in check by Saddam with Kurdish rebels also staking their claim; the emergence of Iran as a regional power of significance; the continued thriving of al-Qaeda and the emergence of the caliphate-inspired Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL) group.

Even as the body count was rising in 2006, Britain’s **Prime Minister Tony Blair** was still fantasising about the political wishes of a country he had been so instrumental in destroying. “This is a child of democracy struggling to be born,” [he told](#) a gathering at Georgetown University in May that year with evangelical purpose. “The struggle for Iraqis for democracy should unite them.” The unfolding disasters were mere “setbacks and missteps”. Blair continued to “strongly believe we did and are doing the right thing.”

And so, we see the same pieties, the same reassurances, the same promises, played on a sedating loop regarding Syria’s fate, the promise of democratic healing, the transfiguration of a traumatised society. How long will such prisons as Sednaya remain unfilled? Therein lies the danger, and the pity.

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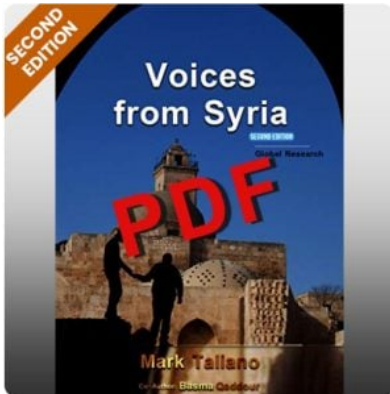
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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG). Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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