

Destroying Syria to Make It Safe for American Values

By [Eric Margolis](#)

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“The Turks have passed by here; all is in ruins and mourning. “

So wrote France’s great writer, Victor Hugo, of the horrors he had witnessed during the Balkan liberation wars of the 1880’s. If Hugo were alive today, he might well have used the same haunting lines to describe the smoking wreckage of the Mideast. Except this time it was the United States, France and Britain who wrought havoc in the Arab world, assisted by modern Turkey.

The UN’s refugee czar, Antonio Guterres, just asserted that there are now 4,013,000 Syrian refugees outside their homeland, and another 7.6 million as internal refugees from the war raging there since 2011.

That total’s some 11.6 million refugees- a staggering 50% of Syria’s population. Over a quarter million are refugees in Europe; the rest spread across the Mideast with the largest numbers in Lebanon and Jordan.



Some of the millions of people who have fled Syria. Photo credit: The UN Refugee Agency / G. Gubaeva

This flood of displaced people is the largest number of refugees in the past 25 years, according to the UN’s Guterres. In fact, Syria’s refugees now exceed in number the 5.5 million Palestinian refugees. At least the Syrians may one day return home; by contrast, Palestinians, stateless for over six decades, have no realistic hope of returning to their former homes in what is today Israel.

Before the 2011 war, Syria used to be a vibrant, growing nation with beautiful old cities and a rich, ancient culture going back over 2,500 years. Damascus is believed to be the oldest continually inhabited city in the world.

Syria was always regarded as the beating heart of the Arab world and its intellectual epicenter. It was also the progenitor of Arab nationalism, a long-time defender of the Palestinians, and a determined foe of Israel - though in recent years the Israeli-Syrian border has been very quiet. Damascus, two generations behind Israel in military strength, dared not confront the powerful Jewish state directly.

For the past four decades, Syria has been ruled by its Alawi minority, an offshoot of Islam's Shia faith. Alawi, like their fellow Shia in Lebanon, were the nation's poorest, most marginalized people. The only work many could get was in the military. Eventually, an iron-fisted Alawi air force general, Hafez al-Assad, seized power. After Assad's death, his second son Bashar took charge of the regime, backed by a strong army and ruthless security organs.

The Bush administration, prompted by Israel, toyed with the idea of toppling Syria's Assad regime but it backed down when a few smart minds in Washington asked who would the US get to replace the existing government? Syria's main opposition came from the outlawed, underground Muslim Brotherhood that spoke for Syria's long-repressed Sunni majority. Washington wanted no part of the Muslim Brothers. Better the Asads, who quietly cooperated with Washington in spite of being backed by Iran.

But in 2009-2010, Washington changed policy. As anti-Iranian war fever in the US mounted, the White House demanded that Tehran renounce its alliance with Iran, or else. The plan was to isolate Iran prior to its being attacked. But Syria refused to cut its vital ties to Tehran.

So Syria was marked for regime change. Washington was fed up with Arab leaders who defied the writ of the American Raj. The Assads would meet the same grisly fate as Saddam Hussein and Muammar Khadafi.

In spring, 2011, anti-Assad guerillas, armed and trained in Jordan by CIA, infiltrated from Lebanon into southern Syria at Derna. This was the squalid little town in which Lawrence of Arabia was captured by the Turks. Derna was a hotbed of anti-government agitation. Soon, more US proxy rebels infiltrated across the Lebanese border. British and French special forces joined the rebels. Saudi Arabia provided the financing.

France, former colonial ruler of Syria and Lebanon, was particularly interested in re-asserting its influence in the Levant and the oil-rich Gulf states. Israel was convinced that overthrowing the Asad regime in Damascus would isolate its two main enemies, Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah movement, leaving the latter vulnerable to a new Israel attack.

A propaganda blitz was unleashed against Syria's President Assad, branding him the butcher of the Middle East. This was nonsense. The mild-mannered Assad was a former London-trained ophthalmologist who became Syria's leader when his older brother Basil was killed in a car crash. The Assad regime had some very tough, nasty senior figures, but certainly no worse or more brutal than many other American Mideast allies like Egypt, Iraq, Algeria or Morocco.

No matter. Bashar Assad became America's new Mideast devil and the object of western-engineered regime change. The means was to be a replay of the 1980's Afghanistan jihad against the Soviets that this writer had covered.

An Arab army of young man ranging from idealists to malcontents was formed by western intelligence services. But unlike Afghanistan, the new Arab force was mostly composed of fanatical, Salafist jihadists created by Saudi Arabia and aided by Turkey and Jordan to pass into Syria.

“America’s Salafists” were the cutting edge of Washington’s grand Mideast strategy, developed during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, to divided and rule by turning Sunni Muslims and Shia against one another. Results in Iraq were spectacular. The idea was to do the same again in Syria, where a minority Shia regime ruled a sullen, restive Sunni majority.

The result, as we have seen, is the relentless destruction of Syria by civil war. The entire nation has become a patchwork of warring groups similar to Germany during the 30 Year’s War of the 1600’s. Salafist jihadis fight al-Qaida-aligned jihadis who fight ISIS forces who fight Kurdish militias, French, Turkish and British special forces are deep in the fray.

Syria’s Christians, about 10% of the population, are backing the Assad government. They saw the destruction of Iraq’s ancient Christian communities, that had been formerly protected by President Saddam Hussein, after the US invasion of 2003 unleashed fanatical Salafists.

The massacres and butchery in Syria is unprecedented in the Mideast. The carnage even exceeds the many horrors of the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war. Street fighting is destroying many of Syria’s villages, towns and cities. Beautiful Aleppo, a world heritage sight, is being blown apart.

Syria’s anti-regime groups could not continue fighting without arms, munitions, medical supplies, radios and cash from the western powers. Washington’s fatuous claims it is deploying “moderate” jihads is a sour joke. The US is fully backing the region’s extremists against one of its oldest secular regimes. Who will finally win this multi-faceted civil war remains unclear.

But it is clear that Syria has been largely destroyed. It joins Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia in ruins and mourning - all examples of states that defied the American Raj. The plight of some 11 million Syrian refugees huddled in tents, drowning in the Mediterranean, or fleeing for their lives must be laid directly on Washington’s doorstep.

The nation of the Statue of Liberty is supposed to welcome and shelter huddled masses fleeing hunger and danger, not cause millions of refugees because of its ruinous Mideast policies.

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