

Ignoring a Leopard's Spots: The UK, Syria and Courting Dictators

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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Moral evangelists in power preaching about democracy and human rights resemble dowdy advocates of family values. When given a chance, they will wander, leaving their principles aside like unwanted impediments. This was certainly the case regarding various Western powers and their relationships with secular authoritarian powers in North Africa and the Middle East.

For a stretch, leaders such as Libya's **Muammar Gaddafi** and Iraq's **Saddam Hussein** were indispensable in keeping fiery Islamic fundamentalists in check, usually through means of killing, torture and detention. In doing so, sectarian and tribal divisions were patched up, keeping revolution at bay. Business could be undertaken, the corporations of the West kept happy. In time, these same figures fell out of favour in the most expeditious fashion. Gaddafi and Saddam became tabloid villains and cartoon grotesques, worthy of overthrow for their sudden threats to international security and butchering their own people. The ideologues in Washington and Downing Street seized the day with a canned, stupid enthusiasm, placing the grey world upon a Procrustean bed of values.

In 2004, **Bashar al-Assad**, now the former leader of Syria, was not regarded as a despot crying out for overthrow by democracy inebrates. The list of achievements his regime did boast, however, was one of torture and the crushing of dissent, a specialty of his father Hafez's three-decade rule. Having come to power in 2000, there were suggestions, coming largely from Britain, that a fruitful relationship might be formed with Bashar.

UK diplomats were most enthused of all by these Levantine prospects, expressing admiration, according to [documents obtained](#) by *Declassified UK* in 2021, at Bashar's "desire for modernisation" and the continuing "drive against corruption, instigated before his father's death". They also swooned at Hafez's record (the Hama massacre of 1982 is skipped over), one that saw "improved living standards, especially among the rural population".

A convinced UK **Prime Minister Tony Blair**, just over a month after the September 11, 2001 attacks on US soil by Al Qaeda operatives, made the first trip by a British leader to Syria. This was followed by a visit by Bashar and his wife, Asmaa, which also involved an audience with the late Queen Elizabeth II and the then Prince of Wales, the current King Charles III.

The desire to engage Damascus was further invigorated by problems posed by the dottily catastrophic invasion of Iraq in March 2003 by US-led forces, charged with finding weapons of mass destruction they never did. The swift defeat of Iraq's military forces in conventional

combat, along with Saddam's hurried exit, did little to stimulate peaceful instincts and turn swords into ploughshares. A fractured Iraq, sundered by faction and sect, became a beacon for jihadist causes. The group Baghdad had been baselessly accused of cavorting with, Al Qaeda, became a genuine threat to US troops and their allies. Foreign fighters, including a certain Islamist **Abu Mohammed al-Jolani**, now famed as the man who overthrew Assad, hit his strides with them. In 2004, he was, along with associates, on the verge of establishing an Iraqi branch of the organisation. A worried Blair was desperately on the search for allies.

Prior to Blair's journey to Washington to meet **President George W. Bush**, a [briefing note](#) by the government released on December 31, 2004 by the UK National Archives charts the nature of Downing Street's interest:

"Our primary concern remains the flow of terrorists into Iraq through Syria. We are pushing the Syrians hard to accept a visit from a team of senior officials from the FCO [Foreign and Commonwealth Office], SIS [Secret Intelligence Service, or MI6] and MOD [Ministry of Defence] to address the issue."

Additionally, it was also hoped that "an intelligence relationship which we hope will bear fruit" might arise.

Then **British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw** sought out the offices of his counterpart **Farouk al-Sharaa**, [writing](#) to him "urging early cooperation on stemming the flow of terrorists entering Iraq through Syria." The released note does little to indicate whether the Assad regime provided any such assistance, though some contextual relevance of this point was provided in October 2004 when talks were held between Straw and al-Sharaa. The Syrian foreign minister was particularly keen to [swat any suggestions](#), largely coming from Washington, that Syrian territory was being used as a staging ground for a Sunni insurgency in Iraq led by former senior Ba'ath Party official **Mohammed Younis al-Ahmed**.

While concerns were expressed about recruits crossing into Iraq from Syria, Bashar's regime, along with those in Egypt and Libya, opened another front of cooperation to Bush and Blair. The regimes in question offered useful sites of collaboration in interrogating and torturing individuals suspected by Western intelligence agencies of being terrorist suspects. The British proved particularly sordid in this regard, bookishly [seeking assurances](#) from various governments via "memoranda of understanding" that they would not, when receiving such suspects, be tortured.

It was almost axiomatic that countries with true and tried records of torture were ones happily agreeing to reassurances they had no interest in observing: Jordan in August 2005; Libya in October that year, and Lebanon a month later. A [chilling observation](#) by former CIA operative Robert Baer to the *New Statesman* in May 2004 is worth recalling:

"If you want a serious interrogation, you send a prisoner to Jordan. If you want them to be tortured, you send them to Syria. If you want them to disappear - never to see them again - you send them to Egypt."

In an echo of history, the current UK government has found a new man of transactional worth in Damascus. The great usurper, Jolani, has taken Bashar's place. His Al Qaeda and Islamic State past is being strategically sanitised, the revolutionary made good and useful. The assurances (that word again) of his Islamist group, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), itself a

jihadist organisation of various iterations, including the Nusra Front, [have been noted](#) by UK **Foreign Secretary David Lammy**. These include a commitment to protecting the rights of minorities in Aleppo, Hama and Damascus, and an undertaking “to co-operating with the international community over monitoring chemical weapons.”

Lammy promises that HTS will be judged “by their actions”, their conduct monitored “closely” in terms of how they treat civilians under their control. But as Albion has shown in the past with bright ease, actions can be discounted when expediency demands it. The spots of a leopard may never change, but they can be conveniently ignored.

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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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