

US, British and French Covert Operations in Syria

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Global Research, April 08, 2021

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

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Terrorism](#),
[US NATO War Agenda](#)

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In October 2011 and February 2012 the US-NATO alliance, with the support of the Gulf autocracies, tried to obtain UN Security Council resolutions, which in all probability would have served as a pretext for an invasion of Syria.

These efforts replicated the underhand game that America, Britain and France had played in securing a resolution regarding Libya, on 17 March 2011, which they immediately violated in bombing that country. By the autumn of 2011, the Russians and Chinese knew that US-NATO was attempting the same deception again, in their desire to topple Syrian president **Bashar al-Assad**. Moscow and Beijing therefore vetoed the resolutions.

Not discouraged by these setbacks, US **Secretary of State Hillary Clinton** lobbied heavily in 2012 for a military intervention against Syria. Clinton said she had the backing of former CIA director **Leon Panetta**, and felt the Americans should have been “more willing to confront Assad”; she insisted “I still believe we should’ve done a no-fly zone”, the green light for a US-NATO invasion as was the case in Libya.

Clinton said she wanted to “move aggressively” on Syria and drew up a plan to do so, but it was never implemented (1). She had previously backed the US-led invasions of Yugoslavia (1999), Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011).



In their attitude towards Syria, Washington and NATO were adopting a similar stance to terrorist organisations like Al Qaeda, which from the beginning was supporting the drive to oust Assad. On 27 July 2011, the new Al Qaeda leader **Ayman al-Zawahiri** outlined his solidarity with the jihadists. Zawahiri called for Assad to go, and expressed regret that he

could not be in Syria himself. "I would have been amongst you and with you" he said, but continued that "there are enough and more Mujahideen and garrisoned ones" already in Syria. He described Assad as "America's partner in the war on Islam". (2)

Zawahiri forgot that the Syrian president had opposed the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Assad was, in fact, the first Arab leader other than Saddam Hussein to condemn the attack. Less than 10 days into the invasion Assad predicted, "The United States and Britain will not be able to control all of Iraq. There will be much tougher resistance". He said of the Anglo-American forces "we hope they do not succeed" in Iraq "and we doubt that they will - there will be Arab popular resistance and this has begun". (3)

The revolts that started in Syria, during the spring of 2011, would have lasted only a couple of months but for outside intervention that radicalised it (4). Syria did not have to endure the ensuing years of warfare, yet the foreign powers - notably the imperial trio of America, Britain and France - had sustained it with the assistance of their allies from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, not to mention the jihadist groups. The opening protests in March 2011 were not against Assad to begin with, but had been directed towards inadequacies at provincial level.

Neil Quilliam, a scholar who specialises in the Middle East, said of the unrest in Syria which began in the southern town of Daraa: "The rebellion as it started was very localized. It was much more to do with local grievances against local security chiefs - it was about corruption at the local level" (5). The discontent was erroneously depicted in the West as directed at Assad's administration. It was then exploited by the US-NATO powers to attempt regime change in Syria for geopolitical purposes.

Israel's military intelligence website, DEBKAfile, reported that since 2011 special forces from the British SAS and MI6 were training anti-government combatants in Syria itself. Other UK personnel from the Special Boat Service (SBS) and the Special Forces Support Group (SMSG), units of the British Armed Forces, had also been training insurgents in Syria from 2011. Moreover, that same year French foreign agents of the General Directorate for External Security (DGSE), and the Special Operations Command, were encouraging unrest against Assad. (6)

As 2011 advanced, the anti-Assad revolts were infiltrated by growing numbers of Al Qaeda members. On 12 February 2012, in an eight minute video Zawahiri urged jihadists in Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan to come to the aid of their "brothers in Syria" and to give them "money, opinion, as well as information". Zawahiri said that the United States was insincere in demonstrating solidarity with them. (7)

Also in February 2012, Hillary Clinton admitted that Zawahiri "is supporting the opposition in Syria" and she intimated that the US was on the same side as him (8). Clinton promised that the Americans would continue to provide logistical help to the insurgents, so as to coordinate military affairs on the ground.

Zawahiri's demand for jihad against Syria was supported by Al Qaeda's number two, **Abu Yahya al-Libi**. He was a terrorist from Libya who had participated in the recent conflict against **Muammar Gaddafi**, alongside numerous other extremists. Al-Libi said in a video from 18 October 2011, "We call on our brothers in Iraq, Jordan and Turkey to go to help their brothers [in Syria]" (9). By late 2011, there were links between the jihadists who overthrew Gaddafi, and those attempting to inflict a similar fate on Assad.

With the Russian and Chinese vetoes on the UN resolutions, Washington was unable to launch a large-scale invasion of Syria, but the goal of the Barack Obama administration and its allies remained that of regime change. Through 2011 and beyond, the leaders of America (**Obama**), Britain (**David Cameron**), France (**Nicolas Sarkozy**) and Germany (**Angela Merkel**) separately called for Assad to leave, disingenuously raising concerns over the Syrian people's plight.

Merkel for instance, who had approved of the US invasion of Iraq, stated on 18 August 2011 that Assad should "face the reality of the complete rejection of his regime by the Syrian people". This allegation was repeated by other Western leaders, and likewise the EU High Representative **Catherine Ashton**. It was all nonsense of course.

Less than six months later the English correspondent Jonathan Steele, citing a reliable poll, noted that 55% of Syrians wanted Assad to remain as president. Steele observed how this inconvenient reality "was ignored by almost all media outlets in every western country whose government has called for Assad to go" (10). It did not quite match the fantasies spun by politicians and parroted by the press.

A great game was being played out on Syrian soil, obscured by the theatrical performances of diplomats at the UN. As envisaged, Assad's fall would enhance US power in the Mediterranean and Middle East, while delivering a blow to Russian, Iranian and Chinese influence. The Kremlin would have to abandon its old naval base in Tartus, western Syria, pushing Russia out of the Mediterranean. Supply routes through which weaponry was delivered to Hezbollah in neighbouring Lebanon would also be cut off.

With a Western-friendly outfit in Syria, the ring could only have been closed tighter around Iran. There are vast quantities of oil and gas astride the Syrian coastline in the Levantine Basin, as the major powers are aware.

However, Syria was a more difficult and complex problem for the US-NATO partnership than the likes of Libya. In Syria the West was challenging the core interests of Russia, China and Iran, three countries with ample resources and powerful militaries.

Meanwhile, the jihadists were starting to wreak havoc. Germany's intelligence agency BND informed the Bundestag (parliament) that, from late December 2011 until early July 2012, there were 90 terrorist attacks carried out in Syria by organisations tied to Al Qaeda and other extremist groups (11). The "moderates" were executing suicide and car bombings against Syrian government forces and civilians. One suicide raid on 18 July 2012 killed Assad's brother-in-law, **General Assef Shawkat**, and the Syrian defence minister, **General Dawoud Rajiha**. The Free Syrian Army, supported by US-NATO and the Gulf dictatorships, claimed culpability for this terrorist attack. (12)

The jihad served only to harm and delegitimise the insurgents' aims, and effectively that of the West. The Syrian public could see, just a year into the conflict, that considerable numbers of those trying to eliminate the Syrian Arab Republic were extremists. In a double whammy blow, the terrorism ensured that defections to the opposition almost came to a halt.

From now on, the majority of military personnel remained loyal to Assad. More terrorist assaults in early October 2012 killed 40 people, consisting of four car bombings which damaged the government district in Aleppo. This further undermined the insurgents. Al-

Nusra Front, linked to Al Qaeda, took responsibility for these insane acts which served no purpose but to inflict bloodshed on innocent people. Suicide bombings grew in frequency.

When Japan's generals unleashed kamikaze squadrons on the Allies from the autumn of 1944, they could at least claim desperation; Imperial Japan was fighting for its life. They never dreamed of using kamikaze pilots two years before, in 1942. By 1944, however, Tokyo's forces were set firmly in retreat. The terrorists invading Syria had no such excuses, which shows how much more extreme the Islamic jihadists are than even Japan's diehard military men.

The atrocities shocked Syria's populace and bolstered sympathy for Assad. The Syrian president undoubtedly reacted to the terrorist rampages with an iron fist; his severe response may have been influenced too by the ongoing threat of a US-NATO invasion, as Western politicians continued to call for his resignation.

Israel's head of military intelligence, **Major General Aviv Kochavi**, told the Israeli parliament in mid-July 2012 that "radical Islam" was establishing a foothold in Syria. Kochavi said, "We can see an ongoing flow of Al Qaeda and global jihad activists into Syria". He was worried that "the Golan Heights could become an arena of activity against Israel" which was "as a result of growing jihad movement in Syria" (13). The Golan Heights, 40 miles south of Damascus, is Syrian territory under Israeli occupation since 1967. Kochavi believed that Assad "won't survive the upheaval".

The Western-supported Free Syrian Army in part consisted of mercenaries recruited from Libya, along with Al Qaeda, Wahhabi and Salafist extremists. As the Al Qaeda boss Zawahiri had demanded, the radicals poured into Syria from neighbouring Lebanon and NATO state Turkey, and were focused on prosecuting a sectarian war - through massacring Syria's ethnic groups such as the Alawites, Christians, Shia and Druze; that is, those generally supportive of Assad whom the jihadists considered to be heretics.

The Syrian National Council (SNC), an anti-Assad coalition based in Istanbul, Turkey, was founded in August 2011. It had been organised by the secret services of the Western powers, and was supported by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Turkey's leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan continued to substitute secularism with Islamism in Turkey, and he became centrally involved in fanning the flames of war in Syria. The Turks were acting as a US-NATO proxy force.

Erdogan allowed the Free Syrian Army to use Turkish bases in Antakya and Iskenderun, located in the far south of Turkey and beside the Syrian border. With Turkey's assistance, NATO armaments were smuggled to the terrorists waging holy war on the Syrians. US intelligence agents were active in and around the southern Turkish city of Adana. (14)

Islamic jihadists arrived in Syria from distant European countries, such as Norway and Ireland; 100 of them alone entered Syria originating from Norway. Radical Muslims of Uyghur ethnicity from Xinjiang province, north-western China, were fighting in Syria at the side of Al Qaeda from May 2012. The Uyghur militants belonged to the terrorist organisation, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), and also the East Turkistan Education and Solidarity Association, the latter group centred in Istanbul. Al-Libi, Al Qaeda's second-in-command, publicly championed the TIP's terrorist campaign against China's authorities in Xinjiang.

Altogether, jihadists from 14 African, Asian and European countries were estimated to be present in Syria from early in the conflict (15). They came from such states as Jordan, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, etc. This was partly a consequence and spillover of the March 2011 US-NATO invasion of Libya. In early 2012, more than 10,000 Libyan mercenaries were trained in Jordan, bordering Syria to the south. The militants were each paid \$1,000 a month courtesy of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in order to compel them to participate in the war on Syria. The Saudis were shipping weapons to the most extreme elements in Syria, something which Riyadh never denied.

In the first week of August 2012, Assadist special forces captured 200 insurgents in an Aleppo suburb in north-western Syria. Government soldiers subsequently found Saudi and Turkish officers commanding the mercenaries. During early October 2012, in another district of Aleppo (Bustan al-Qasr), Assad's divisions repelled an attack and killed dozens of armed militia. They had entered Syria through Turkey and among them were four Turkish officers. Beside the American air base at Incirlik in southern Turkey, the jihadists received special training in modern weapons of war: anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, grenade launchers and US-made stinger missiles.



NATO aircraft, flying without insignia or coat of arms, were landing in Turkish military bases close to Iskenderun, near Syria's border. They carried armaments from Gaddafi's former arsenals, as well as taking Libyan mercenaries to join the Free Syrian Army. Instructors from the British special forces continued to co-operate with the insurgents. The CIA, and contingents from the US Special Operations Command, were dispensing with and operating telecommunications equipment, allowing the "rebels" to evade Syrian Army units (16). The CIA was furthermore flying drones over Syrian air space to gather intelligence.

In September 2012, almost 50 high-ranking agents from the US, Britain, France and Germany were active along the Syrian-Turkish frontier (17). The Germans, at the behest of their intelligence service BND, were operating a spy service boat 'Oker (A 53)' in the Mediterranean, not far from Syria's western coastline. On board this vessel were 40 commandos specialising in intelligence operations, using electromagnetic and hydro-acoustic equipment. As Germany is a NATO member, these activities were most probably undertaken in agreement with Washington.

The Bundeswehr (German Armed Forces) stationed two other intelligence ships in the Mediterranean, 'Alster (A 50)' and 'Oste (A 52)', collecting information on Syrian Army positions. The BND president Gerhard Schindler confirmed of Syria that Berlin wanted "a solid insight into the state of the country". (18)

The German ships' point of support was Incirlik Air Base, which contains 50 US nuclear bombs and hosts the Anglo-American air forces. The German vessels' mission was to

decipher Syria's telecommunications signals, intercept messages from the Syrian government and chiefs of staff, and to uncover Assadist troop locations up to a radius of 370 miles off the coast, through satellite images. Germany had a permanent listening post in Adana, southern Turkey, whereby they could intercept all calls made in Syria's capital Damascus (19). Merkel's government inevitably denied accusations that the German Navy was spying in the Mediterranean; it is the type of activity that few countries claim responsibility for.

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Notes

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