

The West's Involvement in the Syrian Conflict.

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Since 2011 members of British organisations such as MI6 and the Special Air Service (SAS) had been training anti-government forces within Syria, according to the Israeli intelligence outlet Debkafile. These British groups were further supplying weapons and ammunition to the insurgents trying to topple Bashar al-Assad's government in Damascus, along with providing the opposition forces with SIGINT, that is intelligence accumulated through interception of signals.

In November 2011 the newspapers Le Canard enchaîné (in Paris) and Milliyet (in Istanbul) reported that personnel from the French foreign intelligence agency, DGSE, and the French Special Operations Command (COS) were involved in operations pertaining to Syria. They had been helping to organise the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA) and were training anti-government troops and deserters from Syria's regular army, such as in guerrilla warfare tactics.

The training camps were located along the Turkish-Syrian border, in north-eastern Lebanon which rests on Syria's western frontier and also in Tripoli, the Libyan capital, after the fall in 2011 of the country's long-time leader Muammar Gaddafi. The Free Syrian Army consisted of mercenaries and jihadists brought over from Libya, and Islamic fundamentalists from Al-Qaeda and Salafist and Wahhabi fighters, who had entered Syria through Lebanon and Turkey.

Sources in the Pentagon stated that the CIA sent large numbers of drones over Syria's airspace. The CIA drones were keeping track of the location of Syrian government soldiers, and their battles with the enemy which included many thousands of terrorists from Al-

Qaeda, Al-Qaeda-linked groups and from Islamic State.

British and Qatari special forces were present from 2011 in Homs, Syria's third biggest city, located less than 100 miles north of the capital Damascus. They were partaking in covert operations as military advisers and communications analysts, assisting the anti-government elements by providing them with arms and recruiting mercenaries.

Islamic jihadists entered Syria who before were living in Scandinavian states like Norway. From October 2012 dozens of men of Muslim origin travelled from Norway to Syria where they fought beside Al-Qaeda members. Kjell Grandhagen, the head of Norway's military intelligence service (NIS), said he was deeply concerned about this because they routinely chose to join with Al-Qaeda fighters in Syria.

The China Post, a newspaper based in Taiwan, reported that Uyghur radicals from the region of Xinjiang in north-western China were present in Syria since May 2012 fighting alongside Al-Qaeda and other fundamentalists. The Uyghurs were members of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a terrorist organisation, and the East Turkistan Education and Solidarity Association, the latter of which the Chinese government believes has links to the ETIM, which has been called the Turkistan Islamic Party.

Also in 2012 more than 10,000 Libyans were undergoing training in Jordan which has a 230 mile border with Syria. Author Moniz Bandeira outlined that the Libyans were being paid about \$1,000 per month by the Saudis and Qataris, to persuade them to partake in the conflict against Assad's government.

By October 2012 there were 150 soldiers from the US Special Operations Forces (SOF) in Jordan. Part of the task of the American SOF was to prepare Jordanian forces in the event of war spreading beyond Syria's borders.

Through 2011 and beyond, NATO aircraft flying without insignia or coat of arms were landing in Turkish military facilities in the south of the country close to the region of Iskenderun, near Syria's border. The NATO planes were transporting weapons that had belonged to Gaddafi's military, along with mercenaries and jihadists from Libya to join the insurgency.

British special forces continued to co-operate with the opposition, and they were assisted by the CIA and military personnel from the US Special Operations Command (SOCOM). The CIA and SOCOM were using telecommunications devices that enabled the co-ordination of attacks on Syrian soldiers.

Near the air base at Incirlik in the far south of Turkey, where thousands of American troops are stationed, the insurgents were receiving advanced training with grenade launchers, anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons and Stinger missiles. General Nikolai Makarov, a top-level Russian commander, said in October 2012 the opposition forces were using portable anti-aircraft missiles including the US-made Stinger missiles. That same month, in the Bustan al-Qasr district of Aleppo, Syrian government units repelled an attack and four Turkish militants were reportedly among those killed.

In September 2012 around 50 senior intelligence agents from countries like the US, Britain, France and Germany were active along the border between Turkey and Syria. According to Bandeira, American paramilitaries present in the consulate in the southern Turkish city of

Adana, and at the Incirlik Air Base in Adana, were conducting covert operations related to Syria with some assistance from Turkey's intelligence agency (MIT).

By attempting to overthrow the Syrian government, Al-Qaeda was in effect aligned with the liberal "democracies" of the US, Britain, France and Germany, which among the Western powers had participated most heavily in stoking unrest in Syria. During February 2012 the Al-Qaeda boss Ayman al-Zawahiri released a video in which he called for jihadists from countries like Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq to unite on the battlefronts of Syria with the aim of toppling the "anti-Islamic" Assad government. Zawahiri requested that foreign jihadists assist their Syrian brothers with cash and useful information.

The US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged early in 2012 that Zawahiri was supporting the insurrections in Syria. Undeterred by this she promised the Syrian National Council, an anti-Assad coalition force, that the US would continue furnishing logistical and communications support to the insurgents.

Washington was aware from classified analysis that most of the Western weapons sent through Saudi Arabia and Qatar ended up in the hands of Islamic fundamentalists. They wanted to recreate the Great Caliphate in Greater Syria, Bilad al-Sham, reaching from the Euphrates river in western Asia to the Mediterranean Sea. The Persian Gulf monarchies, working with the CIA, increased military aid to the insurgents which included dropping weapons from the air.

The intelligence site Debkafile noted in August 2013 that the US, Israel and Jordan were supporting 30 Syrian opposition groups, some of whom had taken command of the Syrian side of the Quneitra Crossing, the only transit point between Israel and the part of the Golan Heights controlled by Damascus.

Germany's foreign intelligence agency (BND) revealed to the German parliament that, in the six-month period from late December 2011, around 90 terrorist attacks occurred in Syria which were carried out by extremists linked to Al-Qaeda and affiliated groups. The BND itself was involved in aiding the anti-government forces in Syria, through such activities as intelligence gathering and the monitoring of military undertakings on the battlefield.

The methods of terrorism included unprovoked bombing raids and suicide bombings. Among the prominent victims were Syria's Minister of Defence, Dawoud Rajiha, the country's former Minister of Defence, Hasan Turkmani, and the Deputy Minister of Defence, Assef Shawkat. They were killed as a result of another unprovoked bomb attack in Damascus on 18 July 2012. Shawkat was also Assad's brother-in-law.

Groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, associated with Al-Qaeda, were entering northern Syria where they could conceivably move along the coast towards the Syrian port of Latakia. Until September 2013 the jihadists received 400 tons of armaments from Persian Gulf countries in the space of two years, which included machine-guns, automatic anti-aircraft weapons, and ammunition.

In June 2013 the prime minister of Jordan, **Abdullah Ensour**, said that 900 American troops were in Jordan, which it can be recalled borders Syria. Two hundred of these men were involved in training related to chemical warfare, while the other 700 were operating a Patriot missile defence system and F-16 fighter jets which the Americans had deployed to Jordan in June 2013.

Two months before the US Secretary of Defense, **Chuck Hagel**, told the Senate Armed Forces Committee regarding Syria that a military intervention in the country was always on the table. He said the US State Department and USAid would assist the “moderate opposition”.

In early 2012 the Obama administration with the CIA’s knowledge had sanctioned a weapons route, which enabled military hardware from post-Gaddafi Libya to be sent eastwards to Syria to bolster the opposition, many of whom were jihadists and terrorists. In February 2013 Washington pledged \$60 million in military aid to anti-Assad forces, while France publicly supported the sending of war materiel to Syria.

The NATO attack on Libya in March 2011 had been concerned with strengthening the West’s control over the lucrative Mediterranean region, and gaining authority over Libya’s resources, such as its oil reserves which are the largest in Africa. For similar reasons the Western powers were attempting regime change in Syria which like Libya is a Mediterranean state.

Syria is also of course part of the Middle East, a region rich in raw materials and considered by Western analysts as particularly important. Furthermore, in the waters close to Syria’s western shoreline there is an estimated 122 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 107 billion barrels of oil.

By August 2013 American, British and French warships were sailing in the Mediterranean Sea with the potential to attack Syria with tomahawk missiles. Among the warships were five destroyers and an American amphibious transport vessel, the USS San Antonio (LPD-17), with 100 US marines on board and equipped with a helicopter platform.

The French president **Francois Hollande** was prepared to go ahead with an invasion of Syria in 2013 together with the US. Yet president **Barack Obama** was warned by his former Secretary of Defense, **Leon Panetta**, that Syria was a more challenging and complex problem than Libya. Syria’s territory is less accessible to a major ground assault and the Americans, already involved in other large-scale wars like in Afghanistan, would have needed at least as big a military presence in Syria as they had on Afghan territory.

Perhaps most importantly of all, a US-led invasion of Syria would have run the risk of direct armed conflict with Russia, which has had a naval facility at the Syrian city of Tartus since the early 1970s. The Russian military presence in Syria has since expanded to Latakia, a short distance north of Tartus. Launching an attack on Syria could also have destabilised most of the Middle East, following the failed US invasion and occupation of Iraq which shares a 380 mile western border with Syria. Obama was preoccupied too with other regions like the Pacific where the Americans have hoped to contain China.

There were signs that Sunni jihadists fighting against the government in Damascus were co-operating with Sunni jihadists in Iraq, where terrorist atrocities were becoming commonplace. The Israeli military intelligence officer Aviv Kochavi admitted in July 2012 that there was a continuous stream of Al-Qaeda fighters and other radicals entering Syria.

In parts of north-western Syria, close to the city of Idlib, the black flag frequently used by Al-Qaeda and its allies was raised over numerous checkpoints and municipal and public buildings. These were the “moderate forces” that Western governments and the liberal media insisted were in opposition to Syrian government troops.

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Michel Chossudovsky

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