

US-NATO Efforts to Overthrow President Assad in Syria

A Historical Perspective

By [Shane Quinn](#)

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The attempts by Washington and its NATO allies to secure regime change in Syria earlier this century, was concerned with the strategic importance of the Syrian nation. Part of Syria's western frontier rests along the Mediterranean Sea, a body of water which since Roman times has held significance as a link between East and West.

Up until World War II, the Mediterranean region was a vital cog in the machinery of the British empire, assisting in control over her colonies. The Mediterranean allowed the English access to lucrative maritime and aerial routes. Its importance to London was primarily the reason they had announced in December 1914 complete command over Egypt as a protectorate, with that country sharing a long coastline with the Mediterranean.

In more recent times, the United States expressed its intention to control the Mediterranean area, when on 5 October 2011 Washington signed an extensive naval agreement with its NATO ally Spain (1). This enabled the Americans to station warships equipped with missile defence systems, operated by hundreds of NATO troops, at the US-controlled base (Naval Station Rota) at Cádiz, in the far south of Spain on the Mediterranean. The pretext that NATO used for the military expansion was to prevent ballistic missile attacks from Iran and North Korea. It was a bad excuse and one which might well have amused the Iranians and North Koreans.

Already in the spring of 2011 NATO had launched a military attack on Libya, a large oil-rich Mediterranean state, in order to oust the Libyan leader **Muammar Gaddafi**. The West's desire was to install someone in Libya who would be more obedient to their demands, and thereby strengthen Washington's authority over the Mediterranean. The NATO powers - America, France, Britain and Germany - disingenuously cited humanitarian concerns as a core reason for NATO's assault against Libya, where under Gaddafi the Libyan people enjoyed the best living conditions in Africa.

With the outbreak of unrest during early 2011 in another Mediterranean state, Syria, the protests were not in fact directed against **Bashar al-Assad**'s government. A Middle East specialist Neil Quilliam said, "The rebellion [in Syria] as it started was very localized". He noted the demonstrations were "much more to do with local grievances against local security chiefs" and related to "corruption at the local level". (2)

This was being exploited by Western politicians who, as in the case of Libya, made incorrect claims about Syria and depicted the unrest as aimed solely at president Assad. On 18 August 2011 the American leader Barack Obama said, "For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside". (3)

At the same time, a statement was issued together by **Angela Merkel, Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron**, the then leaders respectively of Germany, France and Britain. They stated that Assad faced "the complete rejection of his regime by the Syrian people" and they wanted him "to step aside in the best interests of Syria and the unity of its people".

In reality, Assad has commanded considerable respect and popularity among the Syrian public. A report published for example in mid-January 2012 in the Guardian, a mainstream British paper which is hardly pro-Assad, outlined that a majority (55%) of Syrians wanted Assad to remain as the country's leader. (4)

Among the goals of the US and its NATO allies, in their desire to remove the Syrian president, was to increase their control over the Mediterranean and to isolate Iran, a Western foe and Syrian ally. By trying to install a US-friendly regime in the capital city Damascus, the Americans hoped most of all it would help to contain Russian and Chinese influence in the Middle East and Mediterranean.

The Obama administration wanted to stifle the presence of Russian military facilities in Syria that rest on the Mediterranean, at Tartus and Latakia (5); while cutting supply routes for weapons to Hezbollah, the Lebanese-based militant organisation which has hindered Israeli incursions into Lebanon. Furthermore, in the Mediterranean basin beside Syria there is estimated to be very large quantities of natural resources, amounting to 107 billion barrels of oil and 122 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. (6)

The plans in Washington to dislodge president Assad dated to the George W. Bush years. Diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks outlined that the US State Department had, since at least 2005, been providing millions of dollars to anti-Assad groups in Syria and based elsewhere such as in London. The State Department was sponsoring subversive activities and courses in Damascus. According to a cable from the US embassy in Damascus, the Americans had furnished \$12 million or more to the opposition in Syria alone between 2005 and 2010. (7)

Another reason that the Western powers wanted to replace Assad, is because the Syrian leader refused to sign (in 2009) an agreement allowing the construction through Syrian land of the Western-backed South Pars/North Dome pipeline. Assad made this decision in part because he was defending the interests of his ally Russia (8). The gas pipeline had been earmarked to pass through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Turkey. The gas was meant to be supplied to the NATO states in Europe.

The CIA Director in the early 1990s, **Robert Gates**, wrote that Syria had been a problem for Washington over the course of many years, and that Syria was "a high-priority intelligence

target for the United States” (9). Shortly after the ousting of Saddam Hussein in Iraq during April 2003, the US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, developed contingency plans to extend the US war to nearby Syria; but the Americans had yet to subdue Iraq and could not attack Syria until then. As it turned out, the US military and other occupation forces were unable to conquer Iraq.

On 4 October 2011 the US, France and Britain, with the backing of NATO allies Germany and Portugal, tried to repeat the same deception they had used 7 months before regarding Libya – as the Western powers proposed to the UN Security Council a resolution on Syria, based on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle, which if passed would be used by NATO to bomb Syria, and increase support to the opposition with the aim of overthrowing Assad’s government. Russia and China were well aware of NATO’s intentions and vetoed the resolution.

The Russian Ambassador to the UN, **Vitaly Churkin**, said the situation in Syria was similar to that in Libya, and he warned about how NATO would proceed should the resolution be passed (10). Irritated by the Russian and Chinese vetoes, Obama’s government, supported by London and Paris, instead proceeded to covertly wage war against Syria. The CIA, in collaboration with the Persian Gulf autocracies, was dropping military aid from the air to jihadists in Syria. Washington knew that most Western weaponry, sent through the Persian Gulf, ended up in the hands of Islamic terrorists and fundamentalists who had infiltrated Syria. (11)

The jihadists wanted to restore the Great Caliphate in Greater Syria, Bilad al-Sham, between the Euphrates river and the Mediterranean. In November 2011, it was reported in French and Turkish media that present in Syria were personnel from France’s foreign intelligence agency (DGSE) and the French Special Operations Command (COS). They were training deserters from the Syrian Army in urban guerrilla tactics, and creating the so-called Free Syrian Army. This military force consisted moreover of Sunni extremists and mercenaries recruited from Libya, many of whom had just partaken in the toppling of Gaddafi.

Present in Syria too in 2011, according to Israel’s military intelligence website Debkafile, were British special operatives from organisations like MI6, the Special Air Service (SAS) and the Special Boat Service (SBS). These British units were training anti-Assad militants, and were furnishing them with arms and intelligence details. British special forces were operating from early 2012 in Syria’s third largest city, Homs, less than 100 miles from Damascus. (12)

Sources in the Pentagon revealed that the CIA was operating drones over Syrian territory. The CIA was monitoring the movements of Syrian Army soldiers and their battles with the insurgents. Among the latter were growing numbers of terrorists from organisations like Al Qaeda. The new Al Qaeda boss, Ayman al-Zawahiri, publicly stated on 27 July 2011 his aim to assist in eliminating Assad’s government, and he said there “are enough and more mujahideen and garrisoned ones” already in Syria (13). The CIA and France’s DGSE privately estimated there to be thousands of Al Qaeda fighters in Syria.

American journalist Rod Nordland had acknowledged in July 2012, “The evidence is mounting that Syria has become a magnet for Sunni extremists, including those operating under the banner of Al Qaeda” (14). Without material aid, including from NATO countries, the insurgents did not possess enough firepower to defeat the Syrian Army. Assad said that “a new style of war” was being waged against his country, which he described as “terrorism

through proxies” and that Syria is “the last stronghold of secularism and stability in the region”.

At the start of 2012, Obama personally ordered the establishment of what the CIA called a “rat line” (15). It was a channel enabling the dispatchment of weapons from post-Gaddafi Libya eastwards to Syria. The “rat line” was to run along the edge of southern Turkey, in order to supply the anti-Assad forces with arms.

The US State Department, since 2012 or even earlier, was formulating a program to provide military training to jihadists in Jordan, a country which shares a northern border with Syria. Historian Moniz Bandeira wrote, “A large part of the jihadists from Da’ish [Islamic State], perhaps even most of them, received combat and terrorism instructions there”. The cost of this program was \$60 million, and those providing the training to the jihadists in Jordan were American personnel including from the CIA, the Special Operations Forces (SOF) and Navy SEALs.

US assistance to the insurgents involved training them with high-tech military hardware, such as anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons (16). In early March 2013, about 300 freshly-trained jihadists entered Syria from Jordan. Bandeira wrote that the men trained by the above US special forces “clearly weren’t ‘Syrian rebels’ or ‘moderates’ but Sunni Jihadists and foreign terrorists from various countries, including from Europe”. (17)

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Shane Quinn obtained an honors journalism degree. He is interested in writing primarily on foreign affairs, having been inspired by authors like Noam Chomsky.

He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG).

Notes

1 Luiz Alberto Moniz Bandeira, *The Second Cold War: Geopolitics and the Strategic Dimensions of the USA* (Springer; 1st edition, 23 June 2017) p. 242

2 “How Syria’s ‘geeky’ president went from doctor to ‘dictator’”, NBC, [30 October 2015](#)

3 “Western leaders call for Syria’s Assad to step aside”, France 24, [18 August 2011](#)

4 “Most Syrians back president Assad, but you’d never know from Western media”, The Guardian, [17 January 2012](#)

5 Bandeira, *The Second Cold War*, p. 241

6 “Allaw: Syria’s oil production fell between 20 and 25% because of the sanctions... No company withdraw”, [1 November 2011](#)

7 Luiz Alberto Moniz Bandeira, *The World Disorder: US Hegemony, Proxy Wars, Terrorism and Humanitarian Catastrophes* (Springer; 1st edition, 4 February 2019) p. 117

8 Ibid.

9 Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (WH Allen, 6 August 2015) p. 171

10 Bandeira, *The World Disorder*, p. 119

11 Ibid., p. 345

12 Bandeira, *The Second Cold War*, p. 264

13 “Zawahiri asserts common cause with Syrians”, *Washington Post*, [27 July 2011](#)

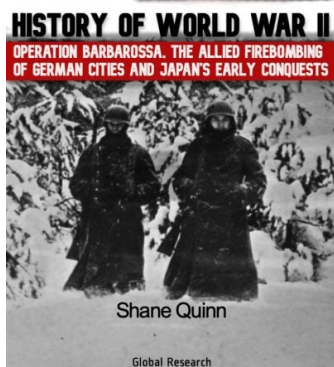
14 “Al Qaeda’s hand now detected in Syria conflict”, *NBC*, [25 July 2012](#)

15 Bandeira, *The World Disorder*, p. 130

16 “Opposition source: Syrian rebels get U.S.-organized training in Jordan”, *CNN*, [15 March 2013](#)

17 Bandeira, *The World Disorder*, p. 131

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