

## Who is behind Syria's "Opposition Rebels"? Mother Agnes Mariam versus the US Media

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*[Mother Agnes Mariam](#), mother-superior of the [monastery of St. James, the Mutilated](#) in Qara, in the [Qalamoun District of Syria](#), which is north of Damascus, visited Denver as part of a U.S. tour which is taking her coast to coast.*

*She spoke at three public venues in two days and then rushed off to catch a plane to Lincoln, Nebraska, where she also has had several speaking engagements, [covered by the Nebraska press](#).*

The Christian Palestinian family of the good mother-superior hails from Nazareth, now in Israel, from whence it was expelled and made refugee in 1948 when Israel was founded. Growing up in Lebanon, she was educated by that country's Maronite Community. Before entering the Melkite Greek Catholic order, Mother Agnes-Mariam claims to have partnered with a group of American hippies in her youth, she with bible in hand. While little attracted to their hashish smoking, she absorbed their commitment to world peace.

Those of us who heard her speak were impressed with her dignity, her commitment to all of the Syrian people and to peace. Her concerns are for all Syrians and her approach distinctly non-sectarian. At the same time, Mother Agnes-Mariam is rightly concerned about the future of Christians both in Syria and the broader Middle East. That community which goes back to the time of Christ is under siege in Syria, Egypt and elsewhere where Salafist elements hope to homogenize the region culturally of its rich, diversified heritage. The Christian community in Syria is, itself, as old as Christianity itself. St. Paul was the Bishop of Antioch. The St. James, the Mutilated Monastery, which Mother Agnes-Mariam has helped refurbish was first built in the fifth century, that is, prior to the rise of Islam and 700 years before the Crusades began.

The Syrian Resistance – Hijacked by Islamic Militant Elements, as in Libya and Mali

The accusation – there was a national campaign to slander her U.S. tour – that she is “an agent of Assad” is, in my view, little more than mischievous nonsense being spread to undermine popular support of a negotiated solution to the Syrian crisis. Her analysis of the Syrian situation suggests a reality that hardly appears in the U.S. mainstream media, far more nuanced and accurate concerning what is transpiring on the ground there. While no fan of the Assad government – she has openly criticized its repressive character – Mother Agnes Mariam insisted that the government has substantial support among the country's population and that the last thing the country's Christian population wants to see is a radical Islamic takeover of the country.

Despite this, some American academics and even peace groups, with their heads in the

sand, have lined up in support of the rebels and still support the demented pipe dream of a military victory for the rebels. Not surprisingly, these so-called defenders of human rights also line up against a negotiated solution to the Syrian crisis.

Many of the American supporters of the Syrian rebel factions frame their support for the rebels within the framework of humanitarian intervention, failing to see that such an approach, as in Libya, is little more than a pretext for big-power military intervention. While claiming humanitarian concerns, they fail to acknowledge – or hardly – the crimes against humanity committed by the so-called rebels, their targeting of the Syrian civilian population, their false-flag operations (the chemical weapons incidents), all by now extensively and well documented.

Those supporting military interventionism on humanitarian grounds in support of the Syrian rebels tend to downplay the degree to which the Syrian opposition is infested with Salafist-Wahhabist fighters arguing that there are only “a few thousand” foreign fighters in Syria. But such claims are quite inaccurate, deceptive. There are currently more than 2,000 foreign Islamic armed militias – no one knows the exact number – in Syria. As they see no place in Syria’s future for non-Sunni Moslems, Christians, and Jews, these Salafist elements have put together quite a record of death and destruction that includes destroying 50 churches – some of them dating back to the time of Christ, such as the 2,000-year-old [Jobar Synagogue in Damascas](#), one of the world’s oldest, if not the oldest) – and 100 mosques of Druze, Alawite and other Islamic Shi’ite and related sects.

Actually, the militant Islamic rebel factions are Syria’s version of cruise missiles on the ground. If, in Iraq, the United States destroyed infrastructure and civil society from the air by intensive bombing campaigns that actually started in 1991 and accelerated after the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, in Syria it is Islamic guerrillas who attack civilian communities, factories, schools, religious institutions, and power stations to the same end. Their goals: to make life unlivable for Syrians, drive them either into the opposition or into exile and to destroy as much of Syria as a country so that it will literally collapse and Syria cease to exist as a state, as happened in Iraq, all the while blaming the lion’s share of the damage on the Syrian military.

Mother Agnes-Mariam Explains What Obama Doesn’t Have the Courage To Her U.S. visit comes two months after the Obama Administration has tried to shift gears on both the Syrian civil war and U.S.-Iranian relations, moving from policies of confrontation to calls for international negotiations to resolve the tensions between the United States and two of its main Middle Eastern adversaries. This shift in U.S. policy, motivated by regional and global concerns, surprised many and came after it appeared that U.S. military operations against Syria were in the offing.

It is no secret that many among the American public are somewhat at a loss to understand the Obama administration’s sudden shift in policy towards the Syrian crisis. One day Obama is speaking of sending in the cruise missiles, the next day negotiating. Having poisoned the media atmosphere here in the U.S. concerning Syria so blatantly and for so long, with so many distortions appearing in the mainstream media and supported by a stream of bellicose pronouncements from Obama administration spokespeople (and the president himself), it is understandable that many in the American public are confused by the sudden shift in policy. As Mother Agnes-Mariam puts it: “It is scandalous the way the mainstream media has approached the Syrian crisis.”

## Washington's Shifting Global Priorities

To understand Washington's Syria shift from war-to-peace mongering, it helps to put U.S. foreign policy in its more global perspective. Globally, the United States, concerned with the growth of Chinese economic and political influence, is trying to re-direct its political and military attention to East Asia and to a certain extent away from the Middle East. The Obama Administration has come to the conclusion (and this probably happened months ago) that a U.S. military intervention in Syria, necessary to reverse the current military balance of forces in Damascus' interest on the ground, would be a major strategic error. Another Middle East military quagmire is the last thing the United States needs. The fact of the matter is that neither the sanctions against Iran nor support for the rebels in Syria produced the desired, sometimes articulate, often denied, result in either country: regime change.

If the Obama Administration is turning its eyes towards Asia, it simply cannot afford to blast Assad out of power in Syria. Too many undefined factors come into play. So the decision was made to put a limit on its military engagements in the Middle East and Central Asia, which have gone poorly, with devastating results for the region, in Afghanistan and Iraq. The buck stopped at Syria. Unable to resolve the Syrian crisis militarily because of all the variables, Obama, wisely - for a change - understood the need to find a way out of the Syrian morass. There are now reports emerging suggesting that the United States and the Russians have been "talking" about Syria for more than six months. I would not be surprised at all if such talks took place. The real problem for the Obama Administration has been how to get out of Syria while still saving face. The Russians, key players in the Syrian crisis, seemed to help Obama come up with some kind of a plan.

## Deconstructing the Syrian Opposition

Enter Mother Agnes-Mariam, who is telling the American people, gently actually, essentially what their government has been doing all along in Syria but what Washington itself doesn't have the courage to relate. Mother Agnes-Mariam comes to the United States just at the time when the Obama Administration is trying to re-shape its Syria policy. But Obama has painted himself into a corner in so idealizing the role of the Syrian opposition. Mother Agnes-Mariam came to Denver with a message of peace - a call for a negotiated settlement of the Syrian crisis - as well as a warning. It is the peace message which the Obama Administration should be announcing to the American people but doesn't seem to have mustered up the courage to do so as of yet, so they hide behind the robes of a Carmelite nun instead and let her take the heat.

Granted, as mentioned above, there are legitimate Syrian elements in the opposition who will have to have a voice in any settlement. But the United States - through its regional allies - has unleashed some very destructive forces in Syria and now has the formidable task of getting these "[jinns](#)" back into the bottle. The shift in policy has angered - if not infuriated - Washington's regional allies - Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey - whom it appears were taken by surprise by the policy shift and are howling in pain and very openly angered at with the shift, about which they can do little.

"The peace message" was essentially that no side will "win" the military conflict in Syria, and that the crisis there - which is essentially now a civil war - can only be resolved through negotiations between the Assad government and its "Syrian-based" (and she stressed this particular formulation) opponents.

“The warning” was that while there is a legitimate Syrian opposition engaged in the fighting against the Assad government, that much of the so-called rebellion had been hijacked by Islamist fundamentalist radicals armed, trained and funded by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey (and others). Responsible for much of the bloodshed and terror – they seem to have a particular penchant to beheading people – the Islamists are mostly foreign elements recruited from throughout the region to fight. Their goal is the establishment of an Islamic state based upon Shari’a law. Mother Agnes-Mariam opposed their participation in the peace process, and calls for their expulsion from Syria. Although by no means an easy goal, unless the United States – through whatever mechanism it can find – can rein in these radical Islamist elements, there will be no peace in Syria.

Concerning the Syrian opposition Mother Agnes-Mariam’s main point is that the Syrian opposition has long been hijacked by radical fundamentalist elements, its main secular, domestic opposition having been shunted to the sidelines in the fighting. Similar scenarios have unfolded recently in both Libya and Mali, where opposition movements were hijacked by Salafist-Wahhabist elements.

At the same time Mother Agnes-Mariam actually sympathizes with the grievances of the Syrian opposition, that part of it that is domestically based. She expressed deep concern for the fact that the opposition has been hijacked by Islamist fundamentalist elements that get logistical, financial support and military training from American regional allies – Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey. Although she didn’t mention it, these Islamist factions, trained in Jordan, Turkey and northern Lebanon, also have received both [financial and military support from the United States](#) Special Forces.

There are also several reports in the Israeli press of [French special forces](#) and [Israeli commandos](#) training and supporting Syrian rebels. Despite all this outside support meant to bring down the Assad government, government forces are winning the military confrontation and enjoy strong political support from major elements of the Syrian population. The latter might not have warm and fuzzy feelings for the Assad government and are well aware of its shortcomings, but much prefer Assad to a Salafist/Wahhabist-run political system based upon Shari’a law.

Those (in Washington, Paris, Riyadh, Ankara, Doha) who argued that the Assad government would fall like a house of cards, as did Gaddafi’s rule in Libya, have made a strategic blunder. Assad remains in power and, if anything, his social base is strengthening while the opposition, despite some legitimate grievances that any peace process will have to address, is something approaching shambles both politically and militarily. As numerous commentators have warned for several years now there will be no military solution to the Syrian conflict. Neither side will win on the battlefield. Only a negotiated settlement under internationally supervised auspices can create a path out of the destruction, death and suffering from which the country is now experiencing.

Right on, Mother Agnes-Mariam!

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