

Canada's Harper Government Supports Covert Mercenary War on Syria, Funds Al Qaeda Affiliated Rebels

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Global Research, November 12, 2013

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

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

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As expected, Prime Minister Harper wholly endorsed President Obama's call to punish the Syrian government for its alleged use of chemical weapons on August 21, 2013.¹

Harper did, however, decline to join the tiny coalition of countries willing to join a US-led air strike on Syria outside the mandate of the United Nations Security Council.² Unlike the United Kingdom and France, his government has not officially recognized the oppositional Syrian National Council as a government-in-exile. Unlike the United Kingdom, France, and the United States, the Harper government has not openly armed the foreign-backed mercenaries.

Has Harper changed his spots? Has he morphed into a peacenik?

Hardly.

Actually the Prime Minister has been working, but mostly behind the scenes, over the past thirty months for regime change in Syria. His government's efforts fall into the following six categories:

1. organizing the *covert* mercenary war against Syria through the Group of Friends of the Syrian People ("Friends of Syria Group");
2. establishing a regime of economic sanctions against Syria and hosting, in Ottawa, the Friends of Syria Group's *International Working Group on Sanctions*;
3. funding and supporting the so-called "rebel" side;
4. planning for an *overt* western military action against Syria;
5. working with Syrian-Canadians antagonistic to the Assad government;
6. contributing to the demonization of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and to the de-legitimation and isolation of his government.

Each of these tactics of the Harper government supports regime change in Syria.

1. Organizing the *covert* mercenary war against Syria through the "Friends of Syria" Group

(FSG)

The Friends of Syria Group (FSG), a misnomer if ever there was one, came into being at a conference in Tunis, Tunisia, on February 25, 2012, with an attendance representing 70 countries.³ FSG now contains a core membership of 11 countries⁴ and has experienced a fluctuating total membership. But a conference of 70 countries does not just materialize out of thin air. Somebody has to organize it.

The Canadian ambassador to Tunisia, Glenn Davidson, was occupied in precisely that endeavour during the month of December 2011. He was one of the parties who organized a *pre-conference* in Tunisia to lay the groundwork for the founding conference of the FSG two months later.⁵

While stating that its end goals were “to support the struggle of the Syrian people for freedom, equal citizenship and democracy”⁶, the practical purpose of the FSG was to launch a covert war against the sovereign state of Syria by recruiting, arming, funding, infiltrating, and supporting an army of up to 120,000 mercenaries to fight inside Syria for regime change. To that end, a division of labour was established at that founding conference. The deep pockets of the Qatari and Saudi Arabian monarchies were to fund the operation. The front-line states of Turkey and Jordan were to provide base and training camps for the mercenaries, safe (although illegal) passage into Syria, as well as services for the inevitable flood of Syrian refugees.

Various North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries, such as the United Kingdom and France, were to funnel clandestine arms and dispatch special forces to train and coordinate “rebel” bands, connected to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) which was the so-called “moderate” military formation then favoured by the FSG. Some of the arms came from the former arsenal of the Libyan government following NATO’s overthrow of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. A huge cache of Yugoslavian weapons came from the pre-war arsenal of Croatia.⁷ The United States openly committed to provide so-called “non-lethal” aid in the form of communications equipment, military transport, and night-vision goggles.

And Canada’s role? To clean up the mess by providing massive support for refugees and resettling a select few to Canada.

No one should be fooled by the emperor’s new FSG clothes. In reality, the mercenary war was an operation planned by the US empire years in advance.⁸ The strategic foreign policy objectives of the United States for regime change in Syria are manifold: first, to extend its reach even further into the oil-rich Middle East; secondly, to remove regimes not compliant with US political and economic goals; thirdly, to shatter the so-called “Axis of Resistance”, a *de facto* alliance of Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon against the State of Israel; fourth, to deny Russia its only Mediterranean naval base at Tartus; and, finally, to redraw the map of the Middle East, balkanizing existing countries, such as Iraq, Libya, and Syria, into tiny sectarian enclaves, making them easier to control.

The stratagem of making it appear that a broad coalition of the world’s countries were united in a “humanitarian” intervention led by the FSG, with the supposed purpose of helping the Syrian people to overthrow an allegedly tyrannical Syrian government, was designed to give the air of legitimacy to an illegal war. Making it appear that the United

States was not leading the operation was calculated to blunt massive anti-war sentiment in the United States and Canada and to give cover to the State of Israel, which stood to benefit greatly from weakening or destroying the Syrian state. Thus, as in NATO's Libyan regime change operation two years earlier, the United States sought to be seen as "leading from behind." Similar to the pose he adopted during the military intervention in Libya, Obama again allowed himself to be portrayed as a reluctant warrior.

Stephen Harper was well aware of consistently high levels of disapproval among the Canadian public, especially in Quebec⁹, to his many extensions of Canada's continuing military role in the occupation of Afghanistan. In Syria, he sought to play his government's junior partnership in the empire in ways that wouldn't rankle ordinary Canadians, such as behind-the-scenes diplomacy (as in organizing the pre-conference to the founding of the FSG) and humanitarian aid for refugees. He and Minister of Foreign Affairs John Baird were also careful on many occasions to state publicly that they supported the United Nations' mission of Kofi Annan and Lakhtar Brahimi to find a political, rather than a military, solution to the conflict. Minister Baird also went on record supporting the Geneva Communiqué of June 2012 which basically called for an immediate ceasefire and negotiations without preconditions between the warring parties.¹⁰

However, in practice, the Harper government never desisted for an instant in its support for the FSG program of regime change in Syria. No matter how the deed is sugar-coated, a crime is still a crime. Initiating a war of aggression against a sovereign state, while talking peace, is still a war crime, in fact, the most serious of all war crimes¹¹ Even threatening the use of force against a member state of the United Nations is itself a violation of Article 2 of the U.N. Charter. Furthermore, a whole slew of other war crimes (many of which have been brazenly posted on Youtube) have been committed by the mercenaries in the pay of the FSG, to which Canada belongs. These violations of the various Geneva Conventions on the conduct of war include the killing of (Syrian government) prisoners of war, the summary execution of Syrian civilians, the pushing to their deaths of Syrian postal workers from the tops of high buildings, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, the killing of journalists, the desecration of enemy cadavers, the kidnapping of Syrian children, the placing of bombs in public places such as schools and markets, and the likely use of chemical weapons on Syrian civilians.¹²

In supporting the FSG, then, Harper has dipped his hands in the blood spilled in Syria. And there has been a lot of it. To date, various sources have claimed that up to 100,000 Syrians (civilians, mercenaries, and Syrian government soldiers and police) have lost their lives in the fighting.

But supporting the FSG also meant that the Harper government has also opened its doors to, and promoted, the Syrian National Council (SNC), which is the unelected body of expatriate Syrians, often in the pay of foreign governments, that has been (until recently) the chosen vehicle of the FSG as a supposedly "moderate" government-in-exile. For example, as early as November 2011, the Harper government was using its consular corps to promote the SNC. A National Post report explains:

The Canadian government has been quietly engaging Syria's opposition and pro-democracy movement, including facilitating several meetings with Foreign Minister John Baird and opening the doors of Canada's embassy in Turkey to the Syrian National Council.

"We have right now a very good relationship with the Canadian government," Syrian National Council member Osama Kadi said (November 7)

"We have met with the minister of foreign affairs many times and he has showed a very positive attitude toward the Syrian National Council."

In late August, Canadian Ambassador to Turkey Mark Bailey hosted a reception to honour and welcome SNC members and introduce them to representatives from European missions, said Kadi, who is also president of the Syrian Canadian Council.¹³

In addition, Prime Minister Harper and his foreign minister, John Baird, have hosted foreign SNC leaders, such as George Sabra, in Ottawa on several occasions. Several SNC leaders actually live in Canada.¹⁴ And, according to the SNC, Canada is "a state that unofficially support(s) the SNC as (a) partner in dialogue."¹⁵

It would be nice if even one MP in the Canadian House of Commons were to take advantage of Question Period to ask Prime Minister Harper or Foreign Minister Baird how they would like it if a cabal of some 71 of the world's richest and most powerful countries conspired to insert foreign mercenaries into Canada, or if that cabal of foreign countries set up a government-in-exile of ex-patriate Quebec sovereigntists or of First Nations activists to effect regime change in Canada. The Harper government expects other countries to respect Canada's claims to sovereignty in the Arctic and over the East Coast fisheries. Yet, it fails to respect the national sovereignty of countries targeted by the United States for re-colonization, such as Syria, Libya, and Iraq. Harper's hypocrisy is boundless.

2) Establishing a regime of economic sanctions against Syria and hosting, in Ottawa, the Friends of Syria Group's *International Working Group on Sanctions*

Economic sanctions are a powerful tool of foreign policy. In fact, they sometimes kill more people than wars. In the ten-year run-up to the Second Gulf War, for example, the United States managed to push tough economic sanctions through the United Nations against Iraq that resulted in the deaths of an estimated 500,000 children.¹⁶ The ten-year regime of economic sanctions against Iraq sufficiently weakened that country such that it was a pushover for George W. Bush's and Tony Blair's "shock and awe" military invasion of 2003.

In the run-up to war on Syria, economic sanctions have likewise been a tool for regime change. On three recent occasions at the United Nations Security Council, Russia and China stunned the great powers of the West by using their (double) vetoes to prevent an unjust intrusion into the domestic affairs of the sovereign country of Syria. On the last occasion, July 19, 2012, the international body was prevented from imposing economic sanctions.¹⁷ Having been stymied at the United Nations, the usual suspects took their quest for economic sanctions against Syria to the FSG. There, the USA, the UK, and France found a receptive audience.

The FSG created an International Working Group on Sanctions (IWGS), essentially a sub-committee of the FSG, to coordinate the imposition of regimes of economic sanctions against Syria in all of the FSG member states. However, because these sanctions regimes are outside the framework of the United Nations, they are, according to Professor Atif Kubursi, completely illegal.¹⁸ Dr. Kubursi, professor emeritus of economics at McMaster

University in Hamilton, Ontario, who also served (and still serves) at high levels with various U.N. agencies, points out that individual states do not have the authority under international law to impose economic sanctions on a country. That authority rests exclusively with the United Nations Security Council which may, according to Chapter 7 of the U.N. Charter, impose economic sanctions upon a member state. Those national leaders who impose economic sanctions upon a U.N. member state, outside the authority of the Security Council, Kubursi argues, could be subject to prosecution at the International Criminal Court.

Nonetheless, the FSG sanctions have teeth and are specifically designed to bring down the Assad government. So far, there have been seven meetings of the IWGS, which take place irregularly every few months.

The seventh IWGS meeting took place in Ottawa on June 24 and 25, 2013 with delegates from over 40 countries attending. According to an Ipolitics report, "The WG (Working Group) meetings allow countries the opportunity to assess the implementation of international sanctions against Syria and identify gaps or new sanctions options to ensure that they remain effective and well-targeted," said an official from Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird's office in an email Monday."¹⁹

The gaps targeted at the Ottawa meeting included oil and phosphates sales from Syria; the sale of arms, military technology, and surveillance equipment to the Syrian government; further banking restrictions on Syria; and restrictions on providing currency to the Syrian government, among others.²⁰

Furthermore, at the Ottawa meeting, a two-track regime of economic sanctions was developed for FSG member states. The Globe and Mail reported:

Part of the discussion was on easing sanctions – not on the Assad regime, but for areas under control of the opposition. The United States and the European Union have already begun to do that, so that equipment for power plants, water-treatment plants, agriculture and other uses can be sold in those regions.

"All of this was designed to reach out to the opposition and help them help the people of Syria in places where they can control," Ambassador Daniel Fried, the U.S. sanctions co-ordinator, said in an interview with The Globe and Mail.

*The goal is to increase pressure on Mr. al-Assad, but allow the local economy in rebel-held areas to perform better.*²¹

In addition, the Ottawa meeting also welcomed into its midst representatives of yet another sub-committee of the FSG, the Working Group on Economic Recovery and Development (WGERD). The purpose of their inclusion was, according to a representative of Minister Baird's office "to allow for the opportunity to discuss the work being done to prepare Syria for economic development and recovery when and if the regime of President Bashar al-Assad falls."²² The WGERD, at its Berlin meeting in Sept 2012, contained representatives from the parent FSG plus "members of the Syrian opposition, including designated representatives of the Syrian National Council and the Syrian Business Forum, members of the Syrian civil society and business community, as well as Syrian economic experts."²³

The fact that the Harper government of Canada was using taxpayers' money to host the

economic sanctions sub-committee of the FSG in Ottawa should of itself be of great concern to Canadians. However, it should also concern Canadians that the Harper government has instituted its own sanctions regime against Syria and tightened it on eleven successive occasions. Although Canada annually exported only \$60 million worth of exports to pre-war Syria,²⁴ the cumulative effect of Canada's sanctions regime coupled with those of 40 other countries is significant. These Canadian sanctions are illegal, according to Dr. Kubursi, under international law. Canadian sanctions now include freezing the assets of specified Syrian nationals and governmental entities, prohibiting all imports from and new investment in Syria, a ban on providing any financial services to Syria, a proscription on the export of luxury goods and technical products (such as telecommunications), and the ending of non-commercial remittances to Syria under \$40,000.²⁵

Unlike the campaign for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions against Israeli apartheid, which was called for in a declaration by over 150 civil society organizations in Palestine, the campaign for economic sanctions against Syria were never called for by civil society organizations within Syria. They are a product of the foreign aggression against the Syrian state, organized through the FSG. The sanctions do have the support of ex-patriate Syrian National Council and its military wing, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which also supported the bombing of their home country of Syria by the United States over the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government on August 21, 2013.

The practical effect of the FSG-organized sanctions regime is to make it harder for the Syrian government to defend its sovereign territory and civilian population; to provide services such as housing, food, medical supplies, and education to its people; and to accumulate foreign currency from the sale of its products abroad. For the Syrian people, according to Dr. Kubursi, it has meant exacerbating the already devastating impacts of the destruction of the physical and social infrastructure of Syria and the continuing violence of the foreign-backed mercenary war. The value of the Syrian pound has plummeted to one-third of its pre-war value, causing severe inflationary pressures upon the Syrian economy. Because spare parts, raw materials, and technological products are prevented by the FSG sanctions from entering the country, factories are shutting down, causing the unemployment rate to rise steadily to its present level of 60%, while farm production is declining. Although pre-war Syria was virtually self-sufficient in the production of foodstuffs (and free of foreign debt), the FSG sanctions have, nonetheless, had the effect of raising food prices for ordinary Syrians.

The economic sanctions have played a role in refugee crisis as well. Unable to find work, having lost their homes,²⁶ subject to extra-legal assassination at the hands of jihadist mercenaries, and unable to find or afford food, many Syrians, especially those of minority faiths, such as Christians, have fled the country in the millions. The latest instance of loss of life from the sinking of a refugee boat off the shores of Italy, containing approximately fifty men, women, and children, were not African migrants but rather Syrian Christians.²⁷

Dr. Kubursi points out that economic sanctions are a blunt instrument of policy at the best of times, intended to influence or change (the policy of) the ruling group in the targeted state. But, because the Syrian government was virtually free of foreign debt and self-sufficient in many areas of the economy, the FSG economic sanctions often missed their mark. Instead, the people with the fewest economic resources and the least ability to weather the economic storm were hurt most by the sanctions.

Overall, Dr. Kubursi argues, the FSG sanctions follow the historical example of the harsh U.N. sanctions against Iraq in the 1990's. They are designed to de-develop the economy and make the country less able to resist foreign military intervention.

Canadians should be very concerned that the Harper government has been enforcing economic sanctions against Syria which are illegal under international law and are causing grave hardship for ordinary Syrians.

3) Funding and supporting the so-called "rebels"

Canadians might have noticed that they were being played for fools by Minister Baird on April 1, 2012, when he announced, at the second meeting of the FSG in Istanbul, that he was allocating (a further) \$8.5 million for humanitarian aid to refugees and to "opposition assistance."²⁸

However, the first incident that attracted significant media attention in Canada to the Harper government's misappropriation of taxpayers' dollars to fund mercenaries in Syria occurred in 2012 when the federal government allocated \$2 million to a domestic group of Syrian-Canadians, called Canadian Relief For Syria (CRS), to establish field hospitals in Syria (presumably in rebel-held areas). The move to give funds to an ad-hoc, unregistered, Canadian organization instead of through established charities such as the International Red Cross, piqued the curiosity of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). It turned out that the CRS was linked to Human Concern International, an organization tied to Al Qaeda through Ahmed Said Khadr, the father of child soldier, Omar Khadr. The Harper government hastily backtracked on the grant and has subsequently been somewhat more circumspect in revealing its largesse to the rebel side.²⁹

However, in 2013, Prime Minister Harper's direct funding of the "rebel" side again was exposed in, of all places, the National Post, a newspaper that usually sings the praises of Harper's Conservative Party. On August 31, 2013, the newspaper revealed that the Harper government spent \$5.3 million "to set up pirate radio, train bloggers and document war crimes by the Syrian government." The biggest slice of the funding, \$1.8 million, however, went to a P-CAT (Planning for A Civil Administration and Transition) which is based on a model developed by the USA in Afghanistan and which, in the case of the Harper government's involvement in Syria, integrates anti-Assad Syrian-Canadians in setting up a post-Assad administration in Syria.³⁰

If those revelations were not shocking enough, a letter published in the Hamilton Spectator on September 5, 2013, reported an admission by local Conservative MP David Sweet that a further \$100 million (possibly out of the \$326 million of Canadian government funds, earmarked for "humanitarian aid" for Syrian refugees) had been misappropriated to bolster the so-called "rebel" cause.³¹ Furthermore, the MP had let on in private correspondence to the letter writer that a further \$80 million would be allocated to the armed opposition and that the few refugees selected for resettlement to Canada (1300 out of an external refugee population up to two million – a veritable drop in the bucket) were not to be chosen based on their need for refuge (e.g., Syrian Christians) but rather on their political allegiance to the "rebels".³²

If there is any truth to the dare to "put your money where your mouth is", then the Harper

government is clearly speaking volumes in support of the covert and illegal mercenary war against Syria.

4) Planning for an *overt* western military action against Syria

On August 28, 2013, just one week after the sensational claim by US President Obama that the Syrian government used chemical weapons to kill up to 1500 of its own citizens, the head of Canada's defence staff, General Tom Lawson attended a top-level military meeting in Amman, Jordan, hosted by the US Chief of Defence Staff, General Martin Dempsey; and the Jordanian Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General Mishaal Zaben. In attendance also were top military brass from the US, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Jordan, the United Kingdom, Italy, France and Germany. The meeting lasted three days. According to the Ottawa Citizen, it was not only "an emergency meeting about the Syrian situation" but also likely "preparation for the building of a coalition force."³³

According to political writer, Yves Engler, the Canadian Department of National Defence (DND) tried initially to keep the meeting secret but "later shifted gears claiming, 'These meetings were planned months in advance and were not in response to the escalating situation in Syria.'" Engler continued by noting, "This is hard to believe as Lawson traveled to Jordan just four months ago."³⁴

Even if DND is telling the truth, Canadians need to be aware that, because of membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), our country would almost inevitably be drawn into any international conflict initiated by the USA, Britain, and France. In just the last fifteen years, the Canadian Forces have been directly involved in three NATO military actions: in the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Libya. Even in Iraq, where popular opposition to the war persuaded Prime Minister Jean Chrétien not to commit boots on the ground to the Anglo-American attack and occupation, Canadian Forces were involved a major naval embargo of Iraq and through rotating officer placements in US military command structures for the Iraqi theatre of war.

Today NATO has a global reach. It has expanded into virtually every continent of the world through a system of intercontinental alliances, associate memberships, and strategic partnerships whose tentacles reach deeply into the Middle East.³⁵ In order to police the world, NATO has recently been in the process of developing an emergency strike force, called the NATO Response Force (NRF). As a step in its development, the NATO Headquarters Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) was conducting a joint military training exercise called ARCADE CHARGER in Cornwall, England, as this article was being written in mid-October 2013. ARCADE CHARGER will be followed in the last two weeks of November 2013 will a much fuller-scale exercise called FUSION, involving about 2000 military and civilian personnel from various divisional and brigade headquarters plus units and troops from Canada, Denmark, Italy, Portugal, the USA, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Australia, and New Zealand.

According to Lt. General Gareth Powell, "As a NATO High Readiness Force, it is critical that we maintain our edge... Both CHARGER and FUSION provide an excellent opportunity for us to test our operating practices and capabilities and ensure that we will be able to effectively command those troops assigned to us on any potential NATO operation." The NATO media release continues: "HQ ARRC is currently on stand-by for short-notice call-up and

subsequent rapid deployment (5 days notice to move) in support of any potential NATO Response Force (NRF) mission *that may develop during 2013.*"³⁶ (*emphasis mine*)

And, apparently, the Canadian military is ready, aye ready, to go. According to a CBC report: "The commander of the 5th Canadian Division in New Brunswick says soldiers in Atlantic Canada are ready to be deployed to Syria, if there is an intervention against the regime in Damascus."³⁷

NATO's new rapid response capability probably sits well with Stephen Harper. He has shown himself on many occasions previous to the Syrian crisis, such as on the questions of Iraq and Libya, to be a loyal supporter of the US empire. And despite the fact that the Canadian public has indicated, in one public opinion poll after another, its disenchantment with war, the Harper government has embarked on a unprecedented peacetime expansion of the Canadian military. Harper announced a twenty-fold increase in military spending forecast over the next 25 years, costing Canadians an incredible \$490 billion. Regrettably, the NDP opposition concurred with this plan, even though every dollar that goes to the military is a dollar lost to health care, child care, education, green jobs, pensions, and infrastructure repair.

Canadians would be wise to ask our political leaders to withdraw our membership from NATO, the military alliance that necessitates these expenditures and supports the foreign policy goals of the US empire, and instead to join a multilateral organization of states that generally opposes war, such as the Non-Aligned Movement.

5) Working With Syrian-Canadians antagonistic to the Assad government

It was shown above that the Harper government negotiated with a group of Syrian-Canadians to establish field hospitals in Syria (probably in rebel-held areas) through an ad hoc group calling itself the Canadian Relief For Syria (CRS). The CRS had ties to Al Qaeda through its connection to Human Concern International. Though this arrangement fell apart under media scrutiny, the Harper government has been recruiting anti-Assad Syrian-Canadians in at least two other ways.³⁸

One way was to work with the Syrian Canadian Council. The Syrian Canadian Council was founded near the start of the foreign-backed mercenary war, in June 2011. One of its purposes is "to build new bridges between the Syrian community and the Canadian Government."³⁹ On October 18, 2012, its spokesman, Faisal Alazem, addressed the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, a vice-chair of which is MP Paul Dewar of the New Democratic Party. In his speech, among other things, Alazem called on countries such as Canada to bypass the UN Security Council, using the doctrine of "the responsibility to protect" (R2P) and the precedent of NATO's intervention in Kosovo, to institute a no-fly zone over Syria to protect Syrian civilians and to support the Free Syrian Army in overthrowing the government of Bashar al-Assad.⁴⁰ In the discussion following his presentation, Alazem indicated that he had accompanied Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, an Italian priest who had left Syria, to meet Minister Baird two months earlier.⁴¹ Clearly, the doors to John Baird's office are open to the Syrian Canadian Council..

Another way of engaging anti-Assad Syrian-Canadians in the illegal war effort was tacitly to encourage or, at least, not to discourage young Canadians from joining the ranks of the

mercenaries. According to the CBC, there may be up to 100 Canadians serving in the mercenaries' ranks, at least one of whom may have already been killed in action.⁴² The CBC news report indicated that the number of Canadians recruited as mercenaries exceeds those of US citizens and is therefore greatly out of proportion to the Canadian population.

When two young Canadians were killed in a recent terrorist attack on a gas plant in Algeria, it was headline news in most Canada media. The then-immigration minister, Jason Kenney, made hay of the fact that these home-grown terrorists were so dangerous that he was contemplating slapping a requirement for exit visas on all Canadians travelling abroad.⁴³ Yet, when 100 Canadians travel abroad for purpose of becoming mercenaries in a foreign war, including Mohamed Dirie, one of the convicted Toronto 18, who was reportedly killed in Syria,⁴⁴ not one of Harper's cabinet ministers utters a word. We can therefore safely assume that they are fine with Canadians becoming involved in the foreign-backed, terrorist enterprise in Syria.

A contingent of one hundred Canadian jihadists does not materialize out of thin air. Someone or some group recruited them. Like the worried mother in the CBC news report cited above, we should ask, "Who?" We should also enquire if it is possible that the Canadian security apparatus was unaware of the recruitment process. According to Amir Maasoumi of Montreal, who was part of an international peace delegation, led by Nobel Laureate Mairead Maguire, to support the national reconciliation movement in Syria in the spring of 2013, and who personally met "rebel" fighters from mercenary bands which claimed to have Canadian fighters as members, "The Canadian government absolutely is aware of the recruitment of young jihadists in Canada."⁴⁵

If so, then why did the Canadian security apparatus turn a blind eye to it? Finally, since at least some of these young Canadian jihadists are likely to return home eventually, what will their role be upon their return in Canadian society? Can we expect suicide bombings in Canada as a result? These questions demand answers.

6) Contributing to the campaign of demonization of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and of de-legitimation and isolation of his government

The Harper government has contributed to an international campaign by FSG states to undermine the credibility of the Syrian president and state. It has used the following four main tactics:

- a) statements castigating the Syrian president and government.
- b) meeting representatives of the foreign-backed opposition.
- c) closing the Syrian embassy and breaking off of diplomatic relations.
- d) blaming the Assad government for the August 2013 chemical weapons incident.

Each tactic will be discussed in turn.

a) statements castigating the Syrian president and government

The children's rhyme that "sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt

me” unfortunately does not carry the same weight in international relations as it does in personal relations. What governments tell their own people and other governments often leads to war.

Prime Minister Harper and Foreign Minister Baird have made numerous statements about the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad all of which are designed to demonize the Syrian president, delegitimize his government, and isolate Syria from the world community. The purpose of the statements, then, is to pave the way for regime change. This tactic of demonization, delegitimation, and isolation has been used recently and successfully by western countries to concoct “humanitarian” interventions in the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Libya, with disastrous results for the civilian populations of those countries.

Below is a sampling of their statements. Please note how the prime minister and his minister of foreign affairs continually ratchet up the venom of their language over the passage of time.

As early as May 24, 2011, Harper issued a statement stressing his “grave concern at the excessive use of force by the Syrian regime against it’s own people”.⁴⁶ On that occasion, he instituted Canada’s first round of sanctions on Syria. On a visit to Costa Rica on August 11, 2011, he described the actions of the Syrian government in trying to repel the foreign-backed mercenary invasion as “outrageous.”⁴⁷ On August 18, 2011, Harper said, “The Assad regime has lost all legitimacy by killing its own people to stay in power. I join with President Obama and other members of the international community in calling on President Assad to vacate his position, relinquish power and step down immediately.”⁴⁸

For his part, Foreign Minister John Baird has also maligned the Syrian government. As early as December 15, 2011, Baird characterized the Syrian president a “butcher” by saying, “If we can’t get a condemnation, just a condemnation of the fact that this man has butchered 5,000 of his people it’s a very sad day for the United Nations.”⁴⁹ Baird’s “Briefing Remarks”, released the same day, contained the following commentary:

As you know, the Government of Canada has reacted with a strong condemnation of Assad’s campaign of terror.

These sanctions, in concert with those of our international partners, have isolated the regime and are having a noticeable impact.

The measures we put in place are not meant to bring further hardship to the Syrian people but to send a message to Assad and his thugs that their actions are absolutely unacceptable. Canada supports the efforts of all peoples to secure basic freedoms, and we look toward the horizon to a new Syria, one that lives in peace with its neighbours and respects the rights of its people.

Pressure on the Assad regime is not coming just from the West. We have seen Syria’s neighbours and former partners in the Arab League take a strong and commendable stand by formally suspending Syria from the Arab League and imposing tough sanctions on the country. The writing on the wall could not be more clear. The Assad regime has lost all legitimacy and its abhorrent behaviour will not be tolerated. (emphasis mine)⁵⁰

On December 23, 2011, after describing the government of Syria as “totalitarian”, Baird

met with members of the SNC. He noted: "Assad will fall... The government will fall. It's only a matter of time; it has no future."⁵¹

On June 13, 2012, Harper called on Russia to stop blocking western efforts at the U.N. to impose economic sanctions on Syria: "We encourage Russia and others to join with us to apply binding sanctions against what is a murderous regime," Harper said, adding that the Syrian situation was unacceptable to Canadians and the "international community."⁵²

In his speech to the UN General Assembly on October 1, 2012, Baird declared: "While the brutal and repressive regime of Bashar al-Assad continues the slaughter of its own people, the United Nations continues to fail to impose binding sanctions that would stem the crimson tide of this bloody assault... Assad must be replaced by a new order that protects Syria's territorial integrity and respects all religious minorities."⁵³

During the emergency debate on Syria in the House of Commons on May 7, 2013, Baird referred to the Syrian "regime" as "bad and evil", "merciless", and "violent and aggressive." Baird added: "Obviously, we want to see him held accountable for his terrible actions. Last year, I said very clearly that what Assad needs to be facing is the International Criminal Court to face charges for committing crimes against humanity."⁵⁴

It should be noted that the above condemnations by Harper and Baird of the Syrian president and his government are universally uttered without the slightest shred of proof. Canadians and citizens of other countries are expected merely to accept the denunciations that roll off the tongues of Harper and Baird as fact. However, according to one public opinion poll at the time of Obama's threats to bomb Syria over the chemical weapons incident of August 21, 2013, something went wrong. Canadians showed themselves unwilling to go to war with Syria.⁵⁵

b) meeting representatives of the foreign-backed opposition

A further tactic to discredit President Assad and the Syrian government is the practice of the prime minister and the minister of foreign affairs to be seen in public, time and again, dealing favourably with representatives of the foreign-backed opposition. Although the SNC is connected to heinous crimes committed by its armed wing, the Free Syrian Army, those crimes are never addressed by Harper and Baird in public. Rather, the purpose of these meetings is to give the Canadian government's stamp of approval to these unelected representatives in order to make it appear to Canadians that a credible alternative exists to the government in Syria.

c) closing the Syrian embassy and breaking off of diplomatic relations

While all of Harper and Baird's hyperbolic statements about the allegedly evil nature of President Assad contribute to the process of demonization, delegitimation, and isolation of his government, actions speak even louder than words. On May 29, 2012, the Canadian government severed diplomatic relations with Syria. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued the following statement:

Canada Expels Syrian Diplomats

May 29, 2012 - "Canadians, like other people around the world, were horrified to learn this

past weekend the details of a massacre in Houla, Syria. The dead included nearly three dozen children under the age of 10.

"Despite repeated, even continual, calls for peace, Assad's reprehensible campaign of savage violence continues unabated.

"Canada has been at the forefront of efforts to isolate Assad and his regime internationally and mitigate a growing humanitarian crisis. Today, Canada is expelling all Syrian diplomats remaining in Ottawa. They and their families have five days to leave Canada. Another Syrian diplomat awaiting passage to Ottawa from Syria will be refused entry.

"Canada is acting in a coordinated effort with our closest partners, who are pursuing similar actions.

"Canada and our partners are speaking loudly, with one voice, in saying these Syrian representatives are not welcome in our countries while their masters in Damascus continue to perpetrate their heinous and murderous acts.

"The ongoing violence must stop immediately, and the Syrian people must be free to realize for themselves a better, brighter future. Canada remains committed to working with the international community to find solutions to this crisis."⁵⁶

The "Houla Massacre", in which 108 people were killed, took place on May 25, 2012 north of the city of Homs in Syria. In the initial rush to judgment, the U.N. Security Council condemned the Syrian government for using heavy artillery in the battle. Following the resolution, the US, UK, Canada, and 10 other countries used the resolution as their rationale to break off diplomatic relations with Syria. Furthermore, on June 1, 2012, the U.N. Human Rights Council (UNHRC), under Navi Pillay, voted 41 to 6 to condemn the Syrian government and to call for an international inquiry. Russia, China, Cuba, Bolivia, and Sudan, were among those states which opposed the resolution.⁵⁷ Navi Pillay used the opportunity to make the following statement: "I reiterate that those who order, assist, or fail to stop attacks on civilians are individually criminally liable for their actions. Other States have a duty to do all they can to prevent and prosecute perpetrators of international crimes." Reprising her role in Libya as a pretext-maker for western military intervention,⁵⁸ she urged the Security Council to consider referring the case of Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC).⁵⁹

All the while, the Syrian government denied culpability for the massacre of the civilians and instead blamed terrorists linked to Al Qaeda for the summary executions of men, women, and children. This view received support from accounts published in the German newspaper, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. By June 27, 2012, the UNHRC had tempered its view. Its report of that date found that it was not possible with certainty to blame the Syrian government for the atrocity that took place at Houla.⁶⁰

Mark Twain used to say, "A lie travels halfway around the world before the truth gets its boots on." And the people of western countries have seen lies, presented in the heat of the moment, as horrible truths used on many occasions as pretexts for war. These include the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the Iraqi incubator babies, the Raczak massacre, the Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, and the distribution of Viagra pills by the Libyan government to encourage mass rapes. All were hoaxes, yet each respectively led to a western military

intervention in North Vietnam, Iraq, the former Yugoslavia, and Libya, with catastrophic results for the civilian population and the integrity of each state.

The Houla Massacre, then, permitted the Harper government of Canada, in tandem with 12 other governments, to up the ante in the movement for regime change in Syria. By breaking off diplomatic relations, Harper and Baird sought further to isolate the Syrian government. Had Navi Pillay been successful in pinning the blame for the Houla Massacre decisively on the Syrian government in the June 27, 2012 report of the UNHCR, that body would have gone on even further to ask the International Criminal Court to initiate an indictment against President al-Assad for war crimes. Such an indictment, as was initiated against Colonel Gaddafi in the run-up to the NATO war on Libya, would have had the effect of completely sidelining the Syrian government in world affairs. Using the analogy of hockey, one could say that President al-Assad would have been placed in the proverbial penalty box and the game would have gone on without him.

Nonetheless, the severing of diplomatic relations served the Harper government with a further reason to talk to and treat opponents of the Syrian government as quasi-official representatives of the Syrian people. From the point of view of Syrian-Canadians and their families in Syria, however, the breaking of diplomatic relations caused a tremendous increase in difficulty of communicating and in resolving problems, in face of a refugee crisis of unprecedented proportions.

d) blaming the Assad government for the August 2013 chemical weapons incident

As with the Houla Massacre, concurrent with the chemical weapons incident in Ghouta of August 21, 2013, there was a rush to judgment in many western countries, to pin the blame for the many deaths on the Syrian government. It is beyond the scope of this essay to show the many flaws in the western finger of blame.

What is important to note is that the Harper government of Canada, as well as the main opposition parties, all instantaneously accepted without question and without proof that the government of Bashar al-Assad was guilty. Only Elizabeth May, the leader of the Green Party, did not succumb to the general rush to judgment. She stuck with the Geneva Communiqué:

...I expressed to Mr. Baird that no military action should take place in the absence of a U.N. resolution. Military action is unlikely to resolve the conflict and could, in fact, worsen the humanitarian crisis...

Greens believe Canada should be actively urging all nation states to pressure both the Assad Regime and its opponents to enter into a ceasefire and negotiate a settlement.⁶¹

However, on August 28 2013, after meeting with George Sabra, the head of the Syrian National Council, Minister Baird said the Syrian “regime” (not “government”) must face the consequences of the chemical attack in Ghouta in Syria on August 21 and he lumped President al-Assad in among dictators of the world:

In 2013, that someone could use these type of weapons of mass destruction with impunity would not only set a very bad precedent for the ongoing conflict in Syria, but also, frankly, would give a green light to any dictator to use these weapons of mass destruction against their own people in future conflicts.⁶²

Although the Harper government, so far, declined itself to join the tiny coalition willing to fight alongside the USA, the Harper and Baird statements served as yet another opportunity to try to instil into the Canadian public the unsubstantiated notion that Bashar al-Assad and his government are in the business of massacring their own people.

CONCLUSION – The Big Picture

The six ways described above in which the Harper government, while paying lip service to the Geneva Communiqué of 2012, has aided and abetted the primary war crime of initiating a war of aggression on the sovereign state of Syria are just the ones that have come to light in the media so far. It is quite possible that the Canadian public is still in the dark about other ways in which Harper is using our tax dollars to promote terrorism in Syria.

Regrettably, except for one short statement by Green Party leader Elizabeth May on the chemical weapons incident of August 21, not a single member of the opposition parties has taken it upon himself or herself to question the entire strategy of using public funds to support an illegal war.

Although a deal has been struck, thanks to skilful Russian diplomacy, temporarily to avert the crisis through the destruction of the Syrian government's stock of chemical weapons, the mercenary war continues to eat away at the very foundations of Syrian society. As this article is written, a localized outbreak of polio has been recorded in Syria, which previously enjoyed a high level of socialized medicare. A small number of young children have become paralyzed from the completely-preventable disease. It behooves Canadians to call their elected representatives to account for their silence on Canada's role in the human tragedy that is unfolding in Syria today.

Even more urgent is the need to find a political solution to the Syrian crisis before it has the possibility of resolving itself into a confrontation between the major military blocs of the world. Like the Balkans in 1914, the Middle East of 2013 is a powder keg. The United States has red-lined the use of chemical weapons as a *causus belli* for military intervention in Syria. However, both Russia and China have also drawn a red line around Syria for their own interests of state, making it clear they will not tolerate an overt western military attack on that country. By doing so, Russia and China have signalled that the era of the unipolar world existing since the demise of the Soviet Union in 1989, in which the USA was the only superpower and whose hegemony was unchallenged, is now over. Just as Sarajevo lit the spark that set off World War I, Syria might become the flashpoint for World War III.

The need for a peaceful resolution of the Syrian crisis has therefore never been greater. We can only hope that the Geneva 2 Conference will soon be arranged to broker an international political solution to the Syrian crisis at the same time as the Mussalaha (national reconciliation) movement led by Syrian Mother Superior Agnes Mariam Delacroix bears fruit at the grassroots level.

NOTES

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