

Israeli Attacks on Iranian Oil Tankers, US Strikes in Syria and Sanctions: The Legacy of a Failed Policy of Regime Change

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The recent disclosure by the Wall Street Journal that Israel has been waging a covert war against Syria-bound Iranian oil tankers, using water mines and other explosives does not come as a surprise. But it would be misleading to attribute this only to a continuing historic rivalry between Israel and Syria, or the contemporary one with Iran. Instead, it is clear that the actions of Israel along with the recent United States air strikes against purported Iranian-backed militias in Syria, as well as the imposition of sanctions against Syria represent the continuum of a failed policy to overthrow the government of Syria.

All of these ill-considered measures do not stand a chance of causing the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, instead they risk prompting an all-out war between Iran and its regional adversaries Israel and Saudi Arabia. However, the fact that the Wall Street Journal used US government and regional officials as sources for the story may indicate that there are dissenting voices in Washington which seek to promote a different course from that taken by successive US administrations.

It has long been an open secret that the government of the United States has, with the connivance of its allies in the Middle East, sought to overthrow the Ba’athist government led by President Bashar al-Assad. This policy, revealed in a succession of position papers, economic manoeuvres and covert warfare, much of which was predicated on the utility of Islamist proxies, was an overarching one designed to reshape the Middle East and North Africa by taking down the governments in a number of countries, all of which shared a common opposition to the State of Israel.

The succession of policy documents prepared by Israel-friendly, often neoconservative, think-tanks, were often explicit about which countries to take down as well as the means of accomplishing this. General Wesley Clark’s recollection of a memorandum shown to him by former colleagues in the Pentagon in 2001 detailed how the United State was going to “take out seven countries in five years”. Those targeted were Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Iran. This was consistent with the ‘Statement of Principles’ of the now defunct Project for the New American Century, as indeed they were with the ‘Clean Break’

document, that is, [A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm](#), a policy document produced in 1996 for Binyamin Netanyahu during his first tenure as prime minister of Israel. Part of the strategy alluded to the “weakening, controlling and even rolling back” of Syria.

Other papers provided the suggested means of destroying these states. The RAND Corporation-produced and Pentagon-funded 2008 paper entitled [Unfolding the Future of the Long War: Motivations, Prospects and Implications for the U.S. Army](#) pointed towards the exacerbation of tensions between Sunni and Shia communities, while a declassified Defense Intelligence Agency [document](#) from August 2012 which was circulated to US government agencies such as the State Department, the CIA and the FBI, explicitly desired the creation of a “declared or undeclared Salafist principality in Eastern Syria”, a state of affairs which it suggested could be achieved by declaring a ‘No Fly Zone’ as had been done in Libya when NATO had given cover to Islamist militias, including the al-Qaeda-affiliated Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, which had overthrown the government of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi during the previous year. There was evidence that a segment of the jihadists who were involved in the overthrow of Gaddafi were transferred to the Syrian theatre most notably through Turkey, which along with Israel and the Gulf emirates, was facilitating the infiltration of Syria by foreign Islamists.

It is against this background that Israeli strikes on Iranian tankers, the launching by the Biden administration of missile strike in Syria and the implementation of sanctions against Syria can be understood.

These actions come in the wake of the failure to unseat the government of Syria. At the heart of this were the actions of Syria’s regional allies, the component nations of the so-called Shia Crescent represented on the ground by the Lebanese militia [Hezbollah](#) and forces of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. The [intervention](#) of Russia proved decisive in preventing the fall of the secular government of Syria. The Syrian Arab Army alongside its Shia allies and the use of Russian air power gradually reclaimed most of the major cities of the country. This reconquest from Islamist groups such as the so-called Islamic State would have been total but for the actions of the United States in occupying the oil-producing eastern part of the country and Turkey in doing the same along parts of its border with Syria. Turkey has also been instrumental in protecting the last bastion of Islamist control in the city of Idlib in north eastern Syria.

The substantive interest of the United States in taking down the government of Syria is not immediately obvious to an impartial observer. And with the perennial economic motives related to mineral wealth absent, the centrality of Israeli interests to which the United States has strenuously catered to for many decades becomes all the more apparent. Certainly, Roland Dumas, a former foreign minister of France, when speaking on the French Parliamentary TV network station LCP in June of 2013, was clear in his assessment that the war in Syria, which had been in his words “[prepared, conceived and organised](#)” at least two years before the insurgency began in 2011, was pursued for the benefit of Israel.

Israel’s influence on [American foreign policy](#) is well documented as is its historical mission to achieve and maintain its regional hegemony by a continuous policy of seeking to [balkanise](#) its Arab and Muslim neighbours. One clear motive for achieving the dismemberment of Syria would be the difficulty of successor statelets to reclaim the Golan Heights which it illegally annexed in 1981.

Israel has pursued its covert war on Iranian tankers with a well practiced amorality and cynicism. The damage or destruction of oil carrying vessels obviously runs the risk of polluting the oceans and nearby coastlines, and the revelations of this subterfuge puts into doubt Israeli accusations that Iran was responsible for the deliberate spilling of oil which reached its coastline and caused what is believed to be one of Israel's worst ecological disasters. The suggested "environmental terrorism" on the part of the Iranians as claimed by Gila Gamliel, the Israeli Environmental Protection Minister, may likely be in fact the proceed of Israeli terrorism on the high seas.

The moral bankruptcy of the policy pursued by the United States and Israel in providing both direct and indirect aid to Islamist groups bent on overthrowing the Syrian government continues with the acts of terror committed by the Israelis on the oceans, a policy condoned by the Trump administration.

President Joe Biden's decision to launch strikes into Syrian territory meant that he became the third successive U.S. President to do this against a sovereign country with which the United States is not officially at war.

It is disturbing to note that apart from some voices who questioned the constitutionality of taking such action given that War Powers Act of 1973 expressly prohibits the executive branch from committing the country to an armed conflict without prior authorisation from Congress, few political figures apart from former congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard have referred to the context of America's strategy of regime change.

Also lacking a moral basis is the regime of sanctions imposed on Syria by the United States through the [Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act](#) of 2019 (the 'Caesar Act'), an action which only serves to deprive the bulk of the Syrian population of food and medicine. The aforementioned occupation of Syrian territory by the United States and Turkey is depriving the war ravaged country of food which could be made from wheatfields and oil which would provide revenues desperately needed for national reconstruction.

Sanctions often only have the effect of increasing mass suffering in the countries which are targeted. One example is the estimated deaths of at least half a million children in Iraq during the regime of Saddam Hussein. The U.S. Secretary of State of the time Madeleine Albright unfortunately asserted that she believed that the price was "[worth it](#)."

The cold-blooded callousness behind Albright's words are no less relevant to what is being imposed on Syria today by the United States which bears responsibility as the grand author of the [Syrian tragedy](#). There is less chance of the United States and Israel succeeding in overthrowing Assad through an economic war than there was in overthrowing him via a covert war. The combination of multiple airstrikes on Syrian territory by Israel and the imposition of sanctions only serves to prolong the presence of Iran and Russia in Syria, a country where as the invitees of the legitimate government of a sovereign state, they have a legal presence in contrast to the illegal occupation of the United States.

The prolongation of anti-Syrian actions risks sparking a destructive regional war between Iran and its regional allies on the one hand and the Israelis and the Saudis on the other, with the latter bloc hoping to involve the United States. Such a war would not only be catastrophic for the region, it would ensure that American moral authority would sink to greater depths after decades of waging a succession of illegal wars.

There is some hope perhaps that sanity will prevail because the help given by official sources to the *Wall Street Journal* which revealed the sabotage policy being pursued by the Israeli state, can be construed as a rebuke for the futile sustaining of a discredited and failed policy of regime change.

Time will tell.

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Michel Chossudovsky

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