

Secret U.S. plan to overthrow Syrian government

By [Global Research](#)

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The Bush administration is secretly funding political opposition to the Syrian government in a bid to topple President Bashar al-Assad's regime, according to a classified document seen by the *Time Magazine*.

The two-page document states that the U.S. is already "supporting regular meetings of internal and diaspora Syrian activists" in Washington, Europe and even Syria to facilitate "a more coherent strategy and plan of actions for all anti-Assad activists."

It also says that Syria's legislative elections, due in March, "provide a potentially galvanizing issue for... critics of the Assad regime". To seize this opportunity, the document proposes a secret "election monitoring" scheme, in which "internet accessible materials will be available for printing and dissemination by activists inside the country [Syria] and neighboring countries."

The proposal also calls for funding at least one Syrian politician who plans to run in the election. The secret scheme would also include "voter education campaigns" and public opinion polling, with the first poll "tentatively scheduled in early 2007."

Quoting unidentified U.S. officials, the *Time Magazine* said the "election-monitoring" scheme hasn't yet been approved, in part because the Syrian elections could be postponed or even cancelled. But one official familiar with the proposal said: "You are forced to wonder whether we are now trying to destabilize the Syrian government."

According to U.S. foreign policy experts, the scheme was developed by a "democracy and public diplomacy" working group that meets weekly at the State department to discuss Iran and Syria.

The State Department's deputy spokesman, Thomas Casey, said the proposal had already been through several classified drafts, but that "the basic concept is very much still valid."

Some critics in Congress and the White House say that such a scheme, aimed at secretly ousting a foreign government, should be legally deemed a "covert action", which by law would require that the Bush administration inform the intelligence committees on Capitol Hill. Some congressmen are also expected to oppose the secret use of publicly appropriated funds to "enforce democracy" in another country.

The Bush administration severed high-level diplomatic ties with Syria in late 2004, saying that the Syrian government failed to stop the flow of fighters into Iraq or stop support for the resistance movements Hezbollah and Hamas.

Analysts say any U.S.-planned attempt to overthrow Assad's government could eliminate the possibility of future dialogue between Washington and Damascus – as proposed by the Iraq Study Group and several U.S. allies.

The whole effort could also be a waste of time, according to Edward P. Djerejian, a former U.S. ambassador to Syria who worked on the Iraq Study Group report.

The Syrian opposition is so fractured and weak that there is little to be gained by such a venture, Djerejian told the *Time Magazine*. “To fund opposition parties on the margins is a distraction at best,” he said. “It will only impede the better option of engaging Syria on much more important, fundamental issues like Iraq, peace with Israel, and the dangerous situation in Lebanon.”

Other analysts point to another goal for the proposed scheme. “Ever since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which Syria opposed, the Bush Administration has been looking for ways to squeeze the government in Damascus,” says Joshua Landis, a Syria expert who is co-director of the Center for Peace Studies at the University of Oklahoma.

“Syria has appeared to be next on the Administration’s agenda to reform the greater Middle East... This is apparently an effort to gin up the Syrian opposition under the rubric of ‘democracy promotion’ and ‘election monitoring,’ but it’s really just an attempt to pressure the Syrian government” into doing what Washington wants, Landis said.

“Syria wants to help U.S.”

President Assad wants to work with the U.S. to bring stability to Iraq, the U.S. Democratic Senator John F. Kerry said on Thursday after meeting the Syrian president.

Kerry, who visited Syria along with Democratic Senator Christopher J. Dodd, – despite the administration’s opposition to the trip – said that the meeting with Assad reinforced the need to follow the recommendation of the Iraq Study Group that Washington directly engage Syria and Iran to find a way forward in Iraq.

“He offered some very direct and concrete ways in which they could be helpful in Iraq,” Kerry said. “I came away with a distinct feeling that there are opportunities here. There are fronts in which we can work together if people are inclined to.”

Kerry also said that Damascus is interested in approaching the Iraq War from a regional perspective, where other Middle East issues — including the Israeli- Palestinian conflict — are part of the equation.

The Massachusetts Democrat also reiterated that President Bush is wrong to rule out direct talks with Syria and Iran. He added that he intends to visit Iran at an “appropriate time”.

“I think you’ve got to talk with people,” Kerry said. “You can disagree with them and disagree with them and disagree with them, and you may not get anywhere, but you’ve got to talk to people.”

Meanwhile, Syria’s official news agency said that Kerry-Dodds’ meeting with Assad was an opportunity for Damascus to work toward an end to violence in Iraq, and to pressure Israel to pull out from the Golan Heights, Syrian territory that has been occupied by Israel since

1967.

“The president and the two senators discussed the deteriorating situation in Palestine and the need to preserve Palestinian national unity,” the SANA agency reported. “The Baker-Hamilton [Iraq Study Group] report was discussed and President Assad affirmed the need to stop violence in Iraq, and Syria’s readiness to achieve Middle East peace under honest international auspices.”

Kerry and Dodd’s visit to Syria is part of a wider diplomatic initiative by senators to improve U.S. relations with Syria. Last week, Senator Bill Nelson, a Democrat, became the first senator in nearly two years to meet with Assad. He said after the meeting that the Syrian president “clearly indicated the willingness to cooperate” with U.S. and Iraqi troops to secure his country’s border with Iraq.

Senator Arlen Specter, a Republican, is also expected to go to Damascus later this week.

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