

Eleven Years Ago: US-NATO Planned Invasion and Proxy War Against Syria

By [Shane Quinn](#)

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The Syrian president Bashar al-Assad must have looked on with some concern, as US-NATO began their attack on Libya in mid-March 2011. There was good reason for Assad to be worried, considering Libya's close enough proximity to Syria, coupled with the fact that the Americans had designated him for removal years before.

Washington's plan to oust Assad was outlined in a classified memorandum, written up in the Pentagon as early as the autumn of 2001, a few months into the George W. Bush presidency. Muammar Gaddafi's Libya was included at the same time on the Pentagon list for invasion, along with other countries such as Iraq and Iran.

Former NATO commander Wesley Clark, a retired four-star US general, spoke candidly about all of this in an interview on 2 March 2007, with American journalist Amy Goodman (1). Since March 2003 US troops were stationed just across Syria's eastern border in Iraq, following president Bush's invasion of that country.

Regarding Syria, the Bush administration wanted to increase its control over the lucrative Mediterranean area – and to tighten the noose on arch enemy Iran, a short distance to the east of Syria. Assad is an ally of Iran and Russia, which ensured that he was viewed with misgiving in the West.

As Washington has long known, since 1971 Russia's navy has been using a base in Tartus, the ancient Syrian port city in the west of the country. This facility is of importance to Moscow, as it is one of the Kremlin's last military bases located outside of the former Soviet Union. It serves as a critical fueling spot for Russian vessels.

President Vladimir Putin had plans, by 2012, to refurbish and expand their Tartus base, allowing it to receive large warships and helping to secure a Russian presence in the Mediterranean (2). Putin also intended to erect naval bases in Yemen and Libya. He offered Gaddafi shipments of heavy weaponry, which could have prevented the Libyan leader from being toppled and killed by Western-backed forces.

Since 2005-2006, president Bush was funding the anti-Assad elements in Syria, as Washington laid the groundwork to ultimately destroy the Syrian Arab Republic (3). Part of the thinking behind this was to thwart the tightening Syria-Russia naval relations, and to undercut Assad's alliance with the Iranians, along with Hezbollah based in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. They are all sworn enemies of Israel.

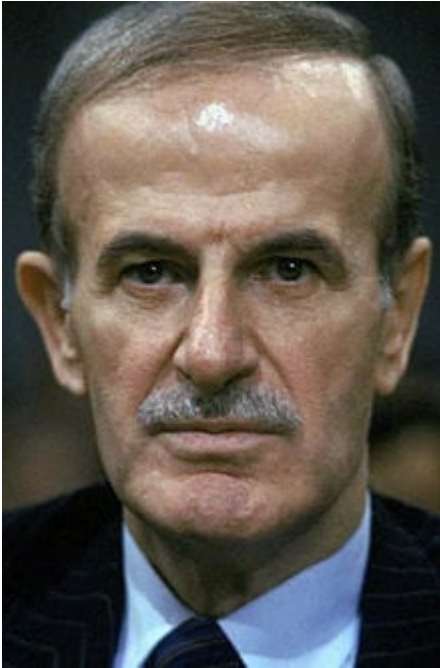
In Bush's State of the Union Address, on 2 February 2005, he directly accused Syria – without providing evidence – of enabling “its territory, and parts of Lebanon, to be used by terrorists who seek to destroy every chance of peace in the region”. By this point, the Syrians were already placed under US sanctions through the Syria Accountability Act, signed into law in Washington during December 2003.

The Bush administration was intent on redrawing the Arab world in its favour, securing complete US hegemony over the Mediterranean and the Middle East's oil and gas reserves.

There was certainly cause for public unrest in Syria; unemployment was increasing, living conditions were deteriorating, especially with the implementation from 2006 of IMF economic programs; including austerity, a cap on wages, privatisation and the deregulation of the financial system. Nor was Syria a model of civil rights or freedom of expression. Yet Syria's stance was anti-imperialist. From the beginning Assad criticised the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, calling it “flagrant aggression” – and the country had a secular foundation relating to its dominant Baath Party, which integrates various sections of Syrian society.

Following Assad's assumption to power in July 2000, it can be mentioned that he commanded considerable respect among the masses of the Syrian people. Assad's popularity with Syria's ethnic groups has been acknowledged by the English foreign correspondent, Jonathan Steele (4). Steele noted how “inconvenient facts get suppressed” as Assad's support with the Syrian public has been virtually ignored by the Western media.

While the fighting in Syria commenced from the spring of 2011, separate pro-government rallies in Syria's two largest cities, Damascus and Aleppo, attracted tens of thousands of Assad supporters into the streets (5) (6). The Syrian leader has enjoyed something of a cult following; portraits of him could commonly be seen in Damascus and Aleppo. Assad also drew significant backing from a broader part of Syria's 21 million population, including among its Christians, Alawites, Shia, Druze, Kurds and other groups. (7)



Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, who was in charge of Syria for 29 years until his death in June 2000, was well regarded at home and in the Arab world. This was mainly because he stood up to the US-Israeli alliance, and brought a measure of security to Syria after a generation of consistent upheaval.

The first anti-government "demonstrations" that broke out in Syria, during mid-March 2011, occurred in Daraa. This is an obscure border town in Syria's far south beside Jordan, and populated by less than 100,000 people. The opening protests, one might add, did not unfold in the major cities where the bulk of organised political opposition was based. Anti-Assad protesters were not altogether peaceful or unarmed. In their midst were insurgents carrying guns, some on rooftops with sniper rifles, shooting at civilians, military personnel and policemen. (8)

In the West, Assad has been universally condemned for responding to the revolts with an iron fist. Scarcely mentioned, however, is that he would have been unwise indeed not to take note as NATO warplanes pounded Libya, in the obscene guise of a "humanitarian intervention". It is quite conceivable that Assad's harsh reaction, to the unrest in Syria, was influenced by what was taking place in Libya; and his fear that he would be next in line to bear the brunt of the US-NATO war machine. Assad was scarcely reassured when on 18 August 2011 Barack Obama publicly stated, "For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for president Assad to step aside". (9)

At the same time, the European Union (EU), toeing the line as usual, urged "the necessity for him [Assad] to step aside" and its High Representative Catherine Ashton made the completely erroneous claim: "The EU notes the complete loss of Bashar al-Assad's legitimacy in the eyes of the Syrian people". Five months later, Steele wrote that "most Syrians are in favour of Bashar al-Assad remaining as president".



From the earliest stages, NATO and the Turkish authorities were making moves to train, arm and equip the Islamist “freedom fighters”. According to Israeli intelligence sources (DEBKAfile) on 14 August 2011, NATO and Turkey’s high command “are meanwhile drawing up plans for their first military step in Syria”, which involved US-NATO supplying the insurgents *with weapons “for combating the tanks and helicopters spearheading the Assad regime’s crackdown on dissent”*.

The Israeli intelligence report revealed that NATO strategists wanted to pour large amounts “of anti-tank and anti-air rockets, mortars and heavy machine guns *into the centers for beating back the government armored forces*”. This scheme, supported by the Gulf dictatorships, drew comparisons with the past CIA recruitment of Mujahideen extremists to fight Soviet armies in Afghanistan. Israel’s DEBKAfile stated also that the NATO plan involved “a campaign to enlist thousands of Muslim volunteers” in the Middle East and elsewhere “to fight alongside the Syrian rebels”. *The Turkish military would be heavily involved in this initiative.*

As a Middle East and Mediterranean country, Syria’s importance is clear, and it shares frontiers with such states as Turkey, Israel and Iraq. Syria itself does not contain large quantities of oil or gas, but its location is significant moreover as a crossing point for pipelines, transporting raw materials through different areas; such as the Arab Gas Pipeline which originates in Egypt before bypassing among others Israel, Jordan and Syria. Furthermore, the Levantine Basin beside Syria’s coastline is estimated to contain 122 trillion cubic feet of gas, and 107 billion barrels of oil.

With Saddam Hussein’s capitulation in Iraq by April 2003, the neoconservatives around Bush were imploring him to advance next on either Syria or Iran. When Bush appeared set on attacking Syria, the Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon (2001-2006) warned him, were they to destroy Assad, the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria might well replace him. Sharon argued that such a scenario would be more detrimental to US-Israeli goals in the Middle East.

In early November 2012 Assad said in an interview, “We are the last stronghold of secularism and stability in the region”. If his administration was to fall Assad insisted “it will have a domino effect that will affect the world from the Atlantic to the Pacific”; when posed with the question of fleeing the country, if he himself became gravely threatened, he replied, “I am Syrian, I was made in Syria, I have to live in Syria and die in Syria”. (10)

Assad would remain in the country despite his position, by the summer of 2015, being “increasingly precarious” and “under mounting pressure on several fronts”, the Guardian newspaper expounded (11). Most of Syria at that stage was under the control of insurgents and jihadist groups, including ISIS, the Al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham, some of whom were receiving funding and armaments from the CIA and NATO members like Turkey.

The CIA supplied the terrorists in Syria with heavy weaponry, such as wire-guided anti-tank missiles (12). This hardware was inflicting extensive damage on the Syrian Army, contributing to their retreat. It seems that it was CIA involvement in the war on Syria, which at least in part prompted Putin to intervene militarily there from late September 2015 – so as to bolster his ally Assad and safeguard Russian interests in the region.

Putin had proposed a negotiated settlement on Syria in February 2012, with the aim of bringing the fighting to a conclusion. The ex-Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari, who was involved in the talks, said of Putin’s offer, “It was an opportunity lost in 2012”. Why was it lost? It had been rejected by the West. Not just the Americans, but by the British and French too, because they preferred to remove Assad by force of arms and establish a client regime of their choice.

London was planning armed action against Syria since at least 2009, as commented on by Roland Dumas, the former French foreign minister and lawyer. Dumas said that in 2009 he had “met with top British officials, who confessed to me that they were preparing something in Syria... Britain was preparing gunmen to invade Syria”. (13)

In 2011, British and Qatari special units were partaking in covert operations in the Syrian city of Homs, just 90 miles north of the government stronghold of Damascus (14). The British and Qatari operatives were collaborating with the insurgents. On the ground in Syria from early on, were members from Britain’s Special Forces Support Group (SFSG) and the Special Boat Service (SBS), which are both part of the British Armed Forces. These groups were supplying the opposition with arms and intelligence support, relating to troop movements from Assad’s Syrian Armed Forces. The CIA was flying drones over Syria, gathering information. Mercenaries continued to enter Syria from Turkey, to engage in combat against the Syrian Army.

In November 2011, the newspapers *Le Canard enchaîné* (of France) and *Milliyet* (of Turkey) reported that French special forces, from the DGSE and Special Operations Command, were training defectors from the Syrian Army (15). The deserters were taught urban guerrilla warfare tactics by their French supervisors, and encouraged to form the ironically titled Free Syrian Army. This organisation was supported from the outset by the triumvirate (America, Britain and France) and funded also by the Western-backed oil dictator countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, along with Turkey.

The ranks of the Free Syrian Army was swollen by mercenaries recruited from Libya, and furthermore Al Qaeda, Wahhabi and Salafist militants, in other words extreme Islamic fundamentalists. These were the “moderate Syrian opposition” forces that news outlets like Reuters was describing well into the war, and which the Western powers were propping up. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged in a BBC interview, from late February 2012, that a “very dangerous set of actors” were present in the region to fight against Assad’s divisions, including as she said “Al Qaeda”. (16)

The Syrian Army deserters were trained in camps located in Tripoli, and on the very borders

of Syria in southern Turkey and north-eastern Lebanon. The aim of the Medieval-style Wahhabi regimes of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, supported by US-NATO, was to destroy the Syrian Arab Republic. Turkey's leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan likewise wanted to see Assad gone. This he felt would help him to realise his dream of establishing a 21st century Ottoman Empire. Erdogan was strongly backing the jihadist factions in Syria.

US-NATO had exploited the Arab Spring uprisings, which began in December 2010, as a pretext for "humanitarian intervention", in order to initiate regime change in countries like Libya and Syria. As with Libya in March 2011, during October of the same year the West tried to procure a UN Security Council resolution on Syria. This would act as cover for another Western invasion (17). On 4 October 2011 America, Britain and France therefore proposed a draft resolution regarding Syria, due to their supposed fears over "the use of force against civilians by the Syrian authorities". It was supported in addition by NATO and EU states, Germany and Portugal. (18)

The cat was out of the bag, however. The resolution put forth was based on the old falsehoods: to "save civilians" through the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P), as in all likelihood NATO warplanes would then be sent to bomb the Syrian state and its infrastructure, paving the way for Assad's removal. By October 2011, after unleashing thousands of air raids over Libya in the previous months, it was starkly obvious that NATO was a lawless organisation acting in the name of imperialist interests (as was the case for many years). Russia and China vetoed the resolution. They knew plainly enough that the West wanted to intervene militarily in Syria.

Undeterred, the same trick was attempted a few months later on 4 February 2012. A vote for a new Security Council resolution was proposed on Syria, backed by US-NATO and the Arab League, the latter dominated by the Gulf autocracies (19). Russia and China also quashed this resolution. The "international community" was using its heartfelt concerns about human welfare as a pretext for military aggression. (20)

In October 2012 Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary-General, praised Russia and China for blocking Western efforts to internationalise the conflict in Syria (21). Washington had little credibility to fall back on. The US Armed Forces invaded Iraq under the guise of finding non-existent weapons of mass destruction; they attacked Libya on the pretext of rescuing civilians, when in actual fact the US-NATO bombardment led to a massive rise in human suffering. As much as a tenfold increase in deaths occurred in Libya following the invasion, according to American political scientist Alan Kuperman (22). He outlined that the US-NATO attack on Libya prolonged the length of the civil war there "by approximately six times".

*

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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 frequent contributor to Global Research.

Notes

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[The Globalization of War: America's "Long War" against Humanity](#)

Michel Chossudovsky

The "globalization of war" is a hegemonic project. Major military and covert intelligence operations are being undertaken simultaneously in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia and the Far East. The U.S. military agenda combines both major theater operations as well as covert actions geared towards destabilizing sovereign states.

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