

What is Really Happening in Syria?

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Global Research, July 24, 2012

24 July 2012

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

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

After several months of talking diplomacy while simultaneously strengthening rebel forces in Syria and demonizing the Damascus government, the Obama Administration has openly decided to go for the kill. Violent regime change will not happen immediately, but it is obviously President Obama's goal.

The White House is now "redoubling efforts to rally a coalition of like-minded countries to forcibly bring down the government of President Bashar al-Assad," the New York Times reported July 21. "Administration officials have been in talks with officials in Turkey and Israel over how to manage a Syrian government collapse."

McClatchy Newspapers stated July 23 that "Despite reports last week that suggested rebel forces were on the verge of major triumphs in Syria, the last few days of fighting there show that a long battle still looms. Forces loyal to Assad in recent days have tightened their grip on the Lebanese border, re-established control over at least one neighborhood in Damascus and perhaps reached an accommodation with the country's Kurds that will free up more troops for battle."

According to the U.S. and its NATO allies, the Damascus regime is engaging in a one-sided, murderous war against its own people, who simply seek democracy. At the same time, the Tehran government is characterized as a "terrorist" regime intent upon building and using nuclear weapons in order to destroy Israel and rule the Middle East. The U.S. news media, as expected, propagates without question Washington's campaign against Syria and Iran.

The United States suggests that its principal reason for seeking regime change in Syria is to promote "democracy" — a tarnished rationale often employed in recent decades to undermine or destroy governments that displease the U.S. superpower, such as in Iran in the 1950s, the Dominican Republic in the 1960s, Chile in the 1970s, Nicaragua in the 1980s, Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Iraq in the 2000s, and Libya in the 2010s, among other instances.

Democracy has nothing to do with Washington's objectives in Syria. America's closest regional ally in the anti-Assad endeavor is the repressive anti-democratic monarchy of Saudi Arabia, which finances and arms the rebel opposition in Syria along with resource-rich Qatar. Both Arab countries played a similar role last year in the U.S./NATO overthrow of the Gaddafi government in Libya.

Having learned a bitter lesson after agreeing to support a no-fly zone in Libya — and seeing that mandate illegally expanded by U.S.-NATO forces in order to wage a vicious war for regime change — both Russia and China have three times exercised their right to veto U.S.

measures in the UN to escalate the conflict in Syria. The Security Council approved a 30-day extension of the UN monitor mission July 20, but Susan Rice, Washington's ambassador to the world body, implied it may be the last continuation.

Both Moscow and Beijing seek to bring about a negotiated solution to the crisis based on a cease-fire, talks and reforms. According to Russian UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin "the only way to put an end to this tragic conflict is to get to the negotiating table." The Syrian government agrees, but the opposition forces — aware that Washington and its allies seek a swift regime change — reject negotiations.

Churkin warns: "Don't be duped by humanitarian rhetoric. There is much more geopolitics in their [U.S.] policy in Syria than humanism.... Our concern is that the Syrian people have to suffer the consequences of this geopolitical struggle."

There are two principal and interlocking reasons the U.S. and its NATO and Mideast coalition allies are conspiring to oust the Assad government.

(1) The first is to secure Washington's geopolitical position in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), particularly as President Obama prepares to focus additional military and economic resources on East Asia to contain the rise of China, and on Eurasia reduce Russian influence.

British news analysis Patrick Seale, whom we consider an objective source, wrote July 19: "The keys to the Syrian crisis lie outside Syria. Indeed, the Syrian crisis cannot be separated from the massive pressures being put on Iran. President Obama is now fully mobilized against both regimes. He seems to have given up trying to secure a win-win deal with Iran over its nuclear program, and he is sabotaging Kofi Annan's Syrian peace plan by conniving in the arming of the rebels. He seems to want to bring down the regimes in both Tehran and Damascus — either because he sees Iran as a rival in the Gulf region or to win the favors of Israel's American supporters in an election year."

According to a July 10 report from Stratfor, the non-government commercial intelligence organization close to certain U.S. spy sources: "Human rights interests alone do not come close to explaining why this particular uprising has received a substantial amount of attention and foreign backing over the past year. The past decade enabled Iran to wrest Baghdad out of Sunni hands and bring Mesopotamia under Shi'ite control. There is little question now that Iraq, as fractured as it is, sits in the Iranian sphere of influence while Iraqi Sunnis have been pushed to the margins. Iran's gains in Baghdad shifted the regional balance of power."

(2) The second reason is to enhance the power of Sunni Islam in MENA and limit the possibility of a larger regional role by the Shia Muslim minority.

There are about 2 billion Muslims in the world today. Statistics vary somewhat, but about 87% are said to be Sunnis, and the remainder are Shia — a minority that has suffered discrimination from the majority. Iran has the largest Shia population in the world — up to 95% of its 75 million people. Iraq has the second largest Shia population — over 60% of its 30 million people.

About 87% of the 26 million Syrians are Muslims — 74% of these Sunni and 13% Shia — but members of the Shi'ite Alawite sect, led by the Assad family that dominates Syria's Ba'athist

regime, have essentially controlled the country for over 40 years.

The principal Obama Administration target in this complex affair is Iran, not Syria. The Syrian government must fall because it is Iran's main Arab ally (as it also is Russia's, a not insignificant factor). Washington has been intent upon gravely wounding Iran after the Iraq war blew up in its face, resulting in the Shia assumption of power in Baghdad.

Until the 2003 U.S. overthrow of the secular Ba'athist regime in Baghdad led by President Saddam Hussein, Iraq's 30% Sunni minority historically dominated the state. Sunni Iraq was in fact Iran's biggest enemy. President Hussein launched a mutually devastating, unnecessary eight-year war against Iran in 1980 with tacit U.S. support. Now, while not yet an official ally, Baghdad is friendly to Tehran.

President Obama labored long to compel Shia President Nouri al-Maliki to allow tens of thousands of U.S. troops and government "advisers" to remain in Iraq after the bulk of forces were to withdraw at the end of 2011. One purpose was to monitor and reduce future Iranian influence. But the Iraqi leader ultimately refused at the last moment — a huge setback for the administration, though Washington no doubt is continuing its efforts to manipulate Baghdad covertly while crushing Iran's ally in Damascus.

The U.S. now views Iraq as positioned within neighboring Iran's sphere of influence, a significant shift in the regional balance of power. This can only be perceived as a serious danger to American hegemony throughout the region and particularly the Persian Gulf/Arabian Peninsula, from whence much of the world's petroleum issues. Washington's greatest fear is that Iran and Iraq — two of the world's principal oil producers — might develop a genuine alliance.

This is a chief reason why the Obama government has contrived pretexts to impose heavy sanctions and threaten military action against the Tehran government. This also explains why ultra-conservative Saudi Arabia so enthusiastically backs sanctions and threats against Iran and is investing heavily in overthrowing Assad. The Saudi royal family, devotees of a fundamentalist brand of Sunni religion, wants to expunge Shia influence throughout the region, as well as keep its own discriminated-against 15% Shi'ite minority under tight control.

One pay back for the Saudis is Washington's indifference to the cruelty toward the Shi'ite majority demanding a modicum of democracy in Bahrain, which is ruled by a dictatorial Sunni monarchy under the protection of Saudi Arabia.

Obama's immediate goal is to break up the developing relationship between three contiguous Shia-led countries — Persian Iran and Arab Iraq and Syria — covering some 1,600 miles from the Afghan border to the Mediterranean.

All other states in MENA circulate well within Washington's hegemonic orbit. The Arab Spring has not diminished U.S. hegemony in the region where regimes were overthrown — Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen. Indeed, U.S./NATO control of Libya and now the Syrian situation appear to have enhanced Washington's regional power. Last week the Arab League, representing all the Arab states, proposed Assad should resign and that the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which leads the armed struggle, should form a transitional regime. Iraq dissented, declaring that it was for the Syrian people alone to decide his fate.

Most Arab countries, and non-Arab NATO member Turkey as well — which flaunts the opportunity to flex its Sunni credentials as it strains to reassert its influence and even leadership in the Middle East — are part of the regime change coalition. Turkey is playing a key role, providing a reliable rear area for the FSA and as a transmission point for arms bound for the opposition.

Even Israel shows public signs of getting directly involved in Assad's downfall. Last week right wing Prime Minister Netanyahu told Fox News Israel "was ready to act" in Syria. Over the years, Tel-Aviv had been more than willing to tolerate the Assad government rather than a Sunni regime until the recent period when Tehran and Damascus began developing much closer ties.

Interestingly, Hamas — the Islamic organization elected to govern the Palestinian territory of Gaza — has recently announced its support for the Sunni rebels in Syria, after receiving decades of solidarity and support from the Assad government. Hamas is connected to the Muslim Brotherhood now leading Egypt which recently guaranteed it would maintain peace and commerce with Israel. Another branch of the Brotherhood is expected to acquire greater political power in Syria if regime change succeeds.

Syria is a strongly nationalist capitalist country which promoted pan-Arabism when it was in vogue in the 1960s. It has been ruled by the Ba'ath Party for over four decades. There are a number of other parties but they are subordinate to the Ba'athists. It is not a western-type democracy and the government is repressive toward dissent. Further, Syria dealt harshly with peaceful demonstrators before the armed opposition was a major factor.

The Damascus government also has positive aspects. The Assad regime is secular in nature, is opposed to colonialism and imperialism, and does not bend the knee — as so do many Arab governments these days — to the U.S. The Assad government strongly opposed America's war in Iraq. It materially and politically backs the rights of the Palestinian people and the Shia Lebanese political party Hezbollah, which is supported by Iran.

In addition, the government appears to have the allegiance of a substantial proportion of the population, including the several minority sects — Christians (10% of the population), Druze, Turkmen, Jews, Yazidis and others. All seem to prefer a secular government to the possibility of a more religious Sunni state, perhaps led by the Muslim Brotherhood.

The oppositional forces include various often contending civil and exile organizations and individuals associated with the Syrian National Council (SNC), the main opposition group, and the approximately 100 different armed urban guerrilla groups broadly identified with the Syrian Free Army. Disunity characterizes the relations between many of these groups, virtually all of which are Sunni. Major rivalries have been reported between a number of military commanders, and sharp splits have taken place within the SNC and between leaders within Syria and influential exiles largely based in Turkey and Egypt. The U.S. has been working for months to identify and promote the leaders it wishes to put into power.

According to Middle East correspondent Pepe Escobar writing July 24 in Asia Times, "There's no way to understand the Syrian dynamics without learning that most FSA commanders are not Syrians, but Iraqi Sunnis. The FSA could only capture the Abu Kamal border crossing between Syria and Iraq because the whole area is controlled by Sunni tribes viscerally antagonistic towards the al-Maliki government in Baghdad. The free flow of mujahedeen, hardcore jihadis and weapons between Iraq and Syria is now more than established.... As it

stands, the romanticized Syrian 'rebels' plus the insurgents formerly known as terrorists cannot win against the Syria military — not even with the Saudis and Qataris showering them with loads of cash and weapons."

Repeated reports from many sources indicate that contingents of fundamentalist jihadists have joined the anti-Assad campaign. Stratfor comments that "The Syrian rebellion contains a growing assortment of Sunni Islamists, Salafist jihadists and transnational al Qaeda-style jihadists. Foreign fighters belonging to the latter two categories are believed to be making their way into Syria from Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq."

According to a report this week in the German daily Die Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, German intelligence estimates that "around 90" terror attacks that "can be attributed to organizations that are close to al-Qaeda or jihadist groups" were carried out in Syria between the end of December and the beginning of July.

Despite such attacks, the Damascus government announced this week that it would not use its chemical weapons "against the Syrian people or civilians during this crisis, under any circumstances." It did, however, suggest it might deploy such weapons against foreign military intervention.

In the U.S. most liberals and Democrats support Obama's Syrian adventure as well Republicans, just as they approved of what little they knew of the White House involvement in the Libyan regime change. GOP candidate Mitt Romney and some Republican politicians demand "tougher action," but that's just for show.

Sectors of the U.S. left are split over America's role in Syria. Some groups support the uprising in the name of democracy, ignoring that Washington and the royal family in Riyadh will be the biggest winners. Those who identify with the anti-imperialist perspective strongly oppose U.S./Saudi involvement. (1)

Our view is that it is the responsibility of the people of a country, such as Syria — and not outside forces — to determine the political character of their government, up to and including armed revolution.

And the anti-Assad international coalition is not just any "outside force." It takes orders from the United States — the most powerful military state in the world responsible for violent aggression and millions of deaths in recent decades — and is also backed by a couple of anti-democratic monarchies and NATO, including two of the region's former colonial overlords, France and Great Britain.

The extent of American involvement with the opposition was partially exposed by the New York Times July 21: "American diplomats are also meeting regularly with representatives of various Syrian opposition groups outside the country to help map out a possible post-Assad government. 'Our focus with the opposition is on working with them so that they have a political transition in place to stand up a new Syria,' Patrick Ventrell, a State Department spokesman, said last week."

As such, in our understanding, the principal aspect of the struggle for power in Syria is not popular forces fighting for democracy but an international coalition led by imperialism seeking to overthrow a government allied to Iran in order to serve Washington's geopolitical objectives and Saudi Arabia's sectarian goal of diminishing Shia influence in the region.

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