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Syria: West duplicity at its worst

By Nile Bowie

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In his famous description of irregular warfare operations, former US President John F. Kennedy in a 1962 quote alludes to “another type of warfare,” one that is “new in its intensity, ancient in its origin-war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins; war by ambush instead of by combat, by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him.”

It preys on unrest. After two harrowing years of division, senseless killing and civil war, the scared Syrian nation and its people are well acquainted with these unconventional methods of warfare. Since the eruption of violence in March 2011, Syria has endured targeted assassination campaigns, ceaseless suicide bombings and shelling, and massacres where infants have had their throats slit to the spine - the time has come for the opposition to engage the Assad government in dialogue and finally bring about a ceasefire and the total cessation of violence and insurgency.

From the reports of third-party sniper-fire targeting both protestors and security personnel in the southern city of Daraa at the very onset of the conflict, to the horrendous attacks on the students of Aleppo University in January 2013 - those who have critically monitored the situation from the beginning are under no illusions - the influx of armaments and mercenary elements from abroad into Syria has brought the situation to where it is today. Western capitals have provided logistics, coordination, political support, and non-lethal aid, Persian Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar have openly provided weapons and monthly salaries for rebel fighters, and Turkey has allowed rebel fighters to receive training and arms from the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the southeastern part of the country, allowing militants to pass into Syria freely.

Syria is being attacked by foreign powers who have deployed mercenaries and extremist fighters from abroad to engage in the destruction of infrastructure and conduct targeted assassinations to bring about an end to the Assad regime. Despite Washington's concerns of heavy weapons falling into the hands of Al-Qaeda-linked militants, the US-backed campaign to coax regime change in Damascus has from the very onset enabled militants who justify their acts of terror in the name of a perverted interpretation of Islam. Reports from the *Washington Post* indicate that US support to anti-government groups in Syria began in 2005, transcending two presidential administrations:

“The U.S. money for Syrian opposition figures began flowing under President George W. Bush after he effectively froze political ties with Damascus in 2005. The financial backing has continued under President Obama, even as his administration sought to rebuild relations with Assad. Syrian authorities ‘would undoubtedly view any U.S. funds going to illegal political groups as tantamount to supporting regime change,’ read an April 2009 cable signed by the top-ranking U.S. diplomat in Damascus at the time. ‘A reassessment of current U.S.-sponsored programming that supports anti-[government] factions, both inside and outside Syria, may prove productive,’ the cable said. The cables report persistent fears among U.S. diplomats that Syrian state security agents had uncovered the money trail from Washington.”

The article describes how Washington funneled about \$12 million to anti-government programs in Syria between 2005 and 2010 to recipients affiliated with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Israel, which is now illegally conducting exploratory drilling in the occupied Golan Heights, and the US view the toppling of Damascus as a means of extinguishing the critical conduit between Iran and Hezbollah in addition to helping isolate the Palestinian resistance. Reports published in 2007 in the *New Yorker* by veteran journalist Seymour Hersh detail how the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia supported a regional network of extremist fighters and terrorists affiliated with al-Qaeda with the aim of stomping out Hezbollah and Syria's Assad in a bid to isolate Iran, who is viewed as an existential threat to the US and its allies in the region. A principal component of this policy shift was the bolstering of Sunni extremist groups, hence the ever-deepening sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict:

“To undermine Iran, which is predominantly Shiite, the Bush Administration has decided, in effect, to reconfigure its priorities in the Middle East. In Lebanon, the Administration has cooperated with Saudi Arabia's government, which is Sunni, in clandestine operations that are intended to weaken Hezbollah, the Shiite organization that is backed by Iran. The U.S. has also taken part in clandestine operations aimed at Iran and its ally Syria. A by-product of these activities has been the bolstering of Sunni extremist groups that espouse a militant vision of Islam and are hostile to America and sympathetic to Al Qaeda.”

While the CIA has purportedly claimed to distribute arms only to “secular” and “moderate” rebel forces, Washington insiders from various academic and think-tank circles have openly endorsed bizarre positions in favor of integrating terrorists into Syria's rebel forces. “Al-Qaeda's Specter in Syria,” penned by Council on Foreign Relations senior fellow Ed Husain, argues in favor of Al-Qaeda terrorists and their inclusion in the Free Syrian Army, stating, “The influx of jihadis brings discipline, religious fervor, battle experience from Iraq, funding from Sunni sympathizers

in the [Persian] Gulf, and most importantly, deadly results. In short, the FSA needs al-Qaeda now." *Foreign Policy's*, "Two Cheers for Syrian Islamists," penned by Gary Gambill of the heavily neo-conservative Middle East Forum, argues in favor of Al-Qaeda, "Islamists -- many of them hardened by years of fighting U.S. forces in Iraq -- are simply more effective fighters than their secular counterparts. Assad has had extraordinary difficulty countering tactics perfected by his former jihadist allies, particularly suicide bombings and roadside bombs."

While many Western media outlets once likened Syria's rebels to pro-democracy freedom fighters, it has become more challenging to view them as anything other than Salafist radicals - the former's existence was amplified specifically to provide cover and legitimacy for the violence and subversion of the latter.

The Friends of Syria group recently convened in Rome, where the US State Department has pledged \$60 million to help the opposition maintain "the institutions of the state" in areas under their control, such as establishing terms of governance, the rule of law, and police forces. Reports have also claimed that the US is also deliberating more open engagement in Syria under newly appointed US Secretary of State John Kerry, however, Washington has stopped short of openly providing arms and military training. American and western officials have told the *New York Times* that Saudi Arabia has recently financed a large purchase of infantry weapons from Croatia and funneled them to Syrian rebel groups. Although the United States is not credited with providing arms to rebel forces, *New York Times* has reported the presence of CIA officials in southern Turkey since June 2012, who are distributing weapons with the Obama administration's blessing. US spokesperson Jay Carney was quoted saying, "We will continue to provide assistance to the Syrian people, to the Syrian opposition, we will continue to increase our assistance in the effort to bring about a post-Assad Syria."

In early March 2013, the Syrian National Council (SNC) will meet in Istanbul to form a provisional government that would oversee rebel-held areas of the country. This wouldn't be the first time the SNC has attempted to form a government; previous attempts in January 2013 fell apart, which many factions refusing to consider a prime ministerial nominee. SNC President Moaz al-Khatib has angered several factions for proposing his readiness to negotiate with the Assad government, a position that many in the opposition refuse to accept. It appears that the US State Department under John Kerry will soon shift its focus to helping the rebels establish a full-fledged alternative government on Syrian territory and recognize it as the legal government of Syria. Such a move would legitimize the transfer of heavy weaponry and would allow the US to directly employ airstrikes or Patriot anti-missile batteries against Assad's forces.

Some would argue that these moves could help marginalize the notable al-Qaeda presence among rebel forces. Pumping more arms and heavier weapons into Syria is unconscionable at this point, and continuing to do so will inevitably bolster the muscle and reach of jihadi and Salafist fighters. The argument that the US and its allies have only armed the "moderate" rebels is a deeply flawed one; weapons are highly in demand by all rebel factions and there is little means of effectively preventing arms from gravitating toward hardcore Al-Qaeda fighters.

Western and Persian Gulf states have proven their double standards by enabling radicals elsewhere - lest we forget the presence of Libyan military commander Abdulhakim Belhadj, former leader of the militant Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (officially designated as a terrorist

organization by the US State Department), who was sent to Syria to aid the Free Syrian Army on orders of the entity formerly known as the Libyan National Transition Council (NTC). The track record of allied Western and Gulf states shows that they are more interested in enabling terrorism for their own purposes rather than preventing it.

International recognition of a provisional SNC government would only create further divisions at a time when national unity is most needed. Although rebel-held areas are badly isolated and in need of humanitarian supplies, the delivery of aid must be facilitated through direct talks and partnership between Moaz al-Khatib's Syrian National Council and Bashar Al-Assad's government. Syrian ambassador to the UN Bashar al-Jaafari has recently urged Friends of Syria states to convince the Syrian opposition to sit for an unconditional national dialogue, which al-Khatib has expressed willingness to take part in. One could surmise that al-Khatib's shift toward dialogue indicates that the SNC is feeling less secure and more wary of a possible military defeat or rivalry with radical factions. Such a dialogue would undoubtedly represent a step in the right direction. Despite political differences and two years of deep conflict, these two parties must establish a genuine ceasefire and partner to restore a climate of normality throughout the country. In this context, both parties must be able to agree on coordinating aid distribution to all parts of the country.

Both the incumbent Syrian authorities and the opposition must find strength to come to a mutually acceptable compromise. These parties have no option other than to search for a solution, lay down an agreeable constitutional basis for elections, and face each other in international monitored polls once the situation stabilizes.

The Syrian people must not have democracy imposed on them, and the victor of this war should not be decided on the battlefield, but by the ballot box. To gain the confidence of the electorate, election observers from the US, Qatar, Russia, and Iran could be sent to monitor the transition process - if the people of Syria want Assad to remain in power, then the rule of majority must be honored. Militant groups comprised of mostly hardline foreign fighters such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamist Ahrar al-Sham cannot be expected to participate in a ceasefire, so the true test of a short-term alliance between Assad and the SNC would be in its ability to cooperate in quelling radical militants and restoring stability - such is a prerequisite for any kind of transition.

Former US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton once threatened Russia and China that they would "pay a price" for their position on the Syrian issue. It should be noted that these powers maintained a balanced approach throughout and advocated dialogue from the start, in addition to stringently adhering to former UN Envoy Kofi Annan's six point peace plan. Iran should also be given due credit for hosting an International Consultative Conference in August 2012, which brought together representatives of thirty nations to call for ending the flow of foreign arms into terrorist hands inside Syria, proposals to broker a meaningful ceasefire, the coordination of humanitarian aid, and support for Syrian people's right to reform without foreign interference.

Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi was quoted in the *Washington Post* stating, "Syrian society is a beautiful mosaic of ethnicities, faiths and cultures, and it will be smashed to pieces should President Bashar al-Assad abruptly fall. The idea that, in that event, there would be an orderly transition of power is an illusion. Abrupt political change without a roadmap for

managed political transition will lead only to a precarious situation that would destabilize one of the world's most sensitive regions.”

It is clear that the Bashar al-Assad government is more stable than many Western states anticipated, and it continues to enjoy popular support. Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah recently warned against sectarian infighting in Lebanon related to the Syrian civil war, arguing that outsiders are pushing Lebanon “toward civil and religious strife, and specifically Sunni-Shia strife.” Iraqi PM Nouri al-Maliki also warned that a victory for rebels would “create a new extremist haven and destabilize the wider Middle East.” The Syrian regime will not imminently collapse but if it is brought down by military intervention, the consequences could lead to a highly unpredictable situation where match and tinder can meet at any moment with debilitating consequences for the region. It is time for both parties to convene. It is time to end this war.