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Regime preservation: How US policy facilitated Assad's victory

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Michael Karadjis



A close examination of eight years of US policy in Syria shows Washington's objective has never been regime change, but rather "a modified form of regime preservation," writes Dr. Michael Karadjis in a comprehensive review of the record.

As the military conflict in Syria has been largely decided in favor of the Bashar al-Assad regime, there have been a number of attempts to review the role of US intervention, or lack thereof, in the Syrian outcome. Late last year, Washington's special envoy to Syria, Jim Jeffrey, [clarified](#) that while the US wants to see a regime in Damascus that is "fundamentally different," it is nevertheless "not regime change" the US is seeking. "We're not trying to get rid of Assad." Much commentary jumped on this as some kind of major shift in US policy, or a signal the US had "given up" on regime change.

Yet, as will be shown below, the US never had a "regime change" policy. On the contrary, Washington has always sought a modified form of regime preservation. Jeffrey's statement was followed by President Trump's announcement of an immediate US withdrawal from Syria. While the "immediate" was later dropped for reasons of expediency, a more gradual US withdrawal is still on the cards; a process coinciding with a creeping rapprochement with Assad by Trump's Gulf allies, spearheaded by the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain restoring diplomatic relations with Syria in late December 2018.

A meeting in Damascus?

According to an August 2018 report, American security and intelligence officials met Syrian security chief Ali Mamlouk in Damascus in June the same year, as part of an "[ongoing dialogue with members of the Assad regime](#)" about completing the defeat of ISIS and the regime's chemical

weapons inventory.

Per the account given by the pro-Assad Al-Akhbar newspaper, the US officials demanded the withdrawal of Iranian forces from southern Syria, an issue already being negotiated between Israel and Russia as part of an agreement to facilitate the return of Assad's forces to the UN armistice line between Syria and the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan, and their defeat of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) Southern Front rebels. The Americans also reportedly asked for a role in the oil business in eastern Syria.

As Scott Lucas [writes](#), following the regime's reoccupation of formerly rebel-held Ghouta, the US "warned against an attack by the regime and its foreign allies on opposition areas of southern Syria. However, just before the June meeting, American officials told rebels that they could not count on any support, and the pro-Assad offensive—again enabled by Russia—seized the territory within weeks."

While the report's specifics cannot be verified—and no Al-Akhbar claim ought to be taken without due skepticism—they are consistent nonetheless with the American response to Assad's reconquest of the south, and the fact that the entire US intervention in Syria has been against ISIS (and other jihadists such as Jabhat al-Nusra/HTS); that the only US concerns about the Assad regime have pertained to chemical weapons; and that the region US troops currently occupy—the northeast, in alliance with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) —is a region with abundant oil supplies.

Such a meeting would also be consistent with the orientation of the Trump administration. In the lead-up to

his 2016 election, Trump [asserted](#) that the US should be on the same side as Russia and Assad in “fighting ISIS,” and [said](#) the US would cut off any meager “support” still going to the anti-Assad opposition.

Fulfilling this promise, in July 2017, Trump [formally ended](#) even the limited support the US had been providing to some FSA groups, which Trump described as “dangerous and wasteful.” As will be seen, this “support” had long ceased to have much meaning in any case. Trump’s government also [ended](#) a \$200 million program funding civil initiatives in the opposition-controlled regions.

Obama and the “regime change” discourse

But that, of course, is Trump. In contrast, the Barack Obama administration is generally seen as a supporter of the “Arab Spring” uprisings, including the Syrian uprising against Assad. While it is generally recognized that the US later tempered its support due to its pursuit of the Iran nuclear deal, and its focus on fighting the Islamic State, the discourse that the US was supporting a “regime change” operation in Syria remains widely believed.

Even Trump’s UN representative, Nikki Haley, despite her own tendency to spout anti-Assad rhetoric, declared in March 2017 that the Trump administration was [“no longer”](#) focused on removing Assad “the way the previous administration was.”

Some of the allegations are quite wild. With reference to an

unverified claim in the Washington Post that a “secret” CIA program to arm and train anti-Assad rebels was costing \$1 billion a year, Patrick Higgins [wrote](#) in Jacobin in 2015 that, “in other words, the United States launched a full-scale war against Syria, and few Americans actually noticed.”

The fact that later estimates of this “secret” CIA funding reduced this figure [to \\$1 billion for the whole war](#) indicates that such estimates should be taken with a grain of salt, but in any case, we will discuss below what this funding actually meant.

In updated 2018 estimates, according to the [testimony](#) of former US ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, “the cost of US military operations in Syria between FY 2014 and the end of FY 2017 was between \$3 and \$4 billion;” figures which cover both the CIA program and the separate Pentagon program to fight ISIS.

Referring to these estimates, the pro-Assad writer Ben Norton described them as a “glimpse of the exorbitant sums of money the U.S. spent [trying to topple the government](#) in Damascus.” Indeed, Norton added the \$7.7 billion in humanitarian aid that the US had provided Syria to these figures to claim the US had spent \$12 billion on “regime change”!

Of course, as is widely known, 2014 was the year that a full US intervention began in Syria, albeit one that had nothing at all to do with “toppling Assad.” In September 2014, the US began its air war against the Islamic State in eastern Syria, while supporting as its ground force the Kurdish-led People’s Protection Units (YPG). The YPG was not and still is not in armed conflict with the Assad regime, meaning the

US has been involved for the last four and a half years in a conflict in eastern Syria that has been almost entirely separate from the main conflict, which mostly takes place in western Syria, between the regime and the rebellion.

As this real US intervention—run and funded by the Pentagon—has involved 15,000 air strikes, equipping the YPG, some 2,000 US special forces, and a number of US military bases, all in the east, it is rather obvious that the overwhelming bulk of this \$3-4 billion-worth of US military operations was spent on this side conflict, not on “toppling Assad.”

This can be seen further with the famous story of the “Balkan arms pipeline.” A title like [“The Pentagon’s \\$2.2 Billion Soviet Arms Pipeline Flooding Syria”](#) may give the impression the Pentagon was spending this money to arm “rebels” to overthrow Assad. Yet reading beyond the title, we see that “the defeat of Islamic State in Syria is reliant on a questionable supply-line, funneling unprecedented quantities of weapons and ammunition from Eastern Europe to some 30,000 anti-ISIS rebel fighters.” [Emphasis added.] The use of the term “rebel” is the confusing part; what is distinctive about the Pentagon’s programs, whether going to the YPG, or to former anti-Assad rebels, is that recipients of these arms must agree to fight ISIS only, and to drop their fight against Assad.

A more nuanced, if still internally contradictory, view was presented last year in the Boston Review by [Ash U. Bâli](#) and [Aziz Rana](#). Even while admitting that the Obama administration’s approach to military intervention “[ultimately consisted of half-measures](#),” which was never any match for the regime’s vast quantities of advanced

weaponry, they nevertheless [claim](#) in a separate article that “continuous U.S. intervention, rather than its absence, has played a key part in fueling the blood-letting,” indeed it “dramatically escalated the violence and exacerbated the harm to its civilian population.” They contrast these military “half-measures” with the idea of a negotiated settlement, the unlikely implication being that if the rebels had received no arms at all; if there had been zero military pressure on Assad; he would have been more amenable to a diplomatic solution.

Deep US ambivalence towards the Syrian uprising

The reality of US intervention in Syria, however, was always markedly different to what is portrayed in such discourse. From the outset, the Obama administration was deeply ambivalent, at best, about the Syrian rebellion.

Despite rhetoric about “democracy,” US governments have long been tightly aligned with absolute monarchies and dictatorships throughout the Middle East, and had no wish to see them overthrown. While it might be argued the US may have a different view of a dictatorship that was less tightly aligned with US interests, the success of a democratic uprising in any state would tend to encourage the same elsewhere, especially in the context of the Arab Spring.

In any case, the Assad regime was never the “anti-imperialist” firebrand that it was sometimes portrayed as;

over the previous decade, it had been one of “[the most common destinations](#)” for US torture-“renditions” of Islamist suspects. Further back, the regime of Hafez al-Assad had sent Syrian troops to fight alongside the US against Iraq during the first Gulf War of 1991, and had intervened in Lebanon, with US and Saudi backing, in 1976 to crush the Palestinian-Muslim-leftist coalition in the civil war, leading to a Syrian-led massacre of Palestinians in the Tal al-Zaatar refugee camp.

As for Assad’s so-called “resistance” to Israel’s illegal occupation of Syria’s Golan Heights, none other than Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently [stated](#), “We haven’t had a problem with the Assad regime; for 40 years not a single bullet was fired on the Golan Heights.” Indeed, in the period preceding the uprising, the regime was engaged in [US-brokered talks with Israel](#) over the Golan. This process had gone so far that Assad was reportedly ready for direct talks with Israel, and Dennis Ross—an ultra-Zionist in the Obama administration if ever there was one—[was convinced](#) that “Syria is ready to move away from Iran and reduce relations with Hezbollah and Hamas, and work with the US in the fight against terrorism.”

Meanwhile, in the initial months of the uprising [Saudi Arabia](#), [the UAE](#), and [Qatar](#) all gave strong support to Assad. From the viewpoint of all the closest US allies in the region, there was no reason for the US government to wish for the overthrow of the regime.

Undeniably, however, the US was more tightly allied with Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak—one of the largest recipients of US military aid in the world—than with Assad in 2011. And yet, within a week of the onset of the Egyptian

uprising on January 25, Obama was already calling on Mubarak to [begin the transition to a new government “now,”](#) and claiming to be “inspired” by the uprising, while Republican senator John McCain demanded that Mubarak immediately [“step down.”](#) Even Mubarak’s announcement on February 10 that he would hand power to his vice-president was scolded by Obama as [insufficient to meet the demands of the people.](#)

In contrast, it took until August 18 for Obama to make a similar call on Assad to “step aside;” that is, some five months after the outbreak of the Syrian uprising on March 15, by which time the regime had killed thousands of peaceful protestors in what a UN human rights mission declared [“may amount to crimes against humanity.”](#)

Considering that the usual “evidence” presented for Obama’s alleged “regime change” policy is this call on Assad to step aside, the US must then have been particularly gung-ho about regime change against its ally Mubarak!

Two weeks after the outbreak of the uprising, when dozens had already been killed, US State Secretary Hillary Clinton asserted that [Assad was a “reformer,”](#) starkly contrasting the situation in Syria with that in Libya, where the US was already intervening against Muammar Gaddafi. In similar vein, Senator John Kerry—who dined with Assad in Damascus in 2009—said he had been “a believer for some period of time that [we could make progress in that relationship](#)” [with the Assad regime] “as it embraces a legitimate relationship with the United States and the West.”

WikiLeaks files from the time (h/t [Clay Clairborn](#)) provide further evidence of this orientation. A March 31 Stratfor file [assessed](#) that “Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United States did not even hesitate throwing their support behind Assad at the very beginning,” while an intelligence assessment written for Syrian official Fares Kallas [claimed](#) it was clear that “the Obama Administration wants the leadership in Syria to survive,” noting the lack of calls for regime change or military intervention and the “relatively muted” criticism.

Another WikiLeaks [email](#) by Stratfor spook Bayless Parsley provides some analysis of this US response to Egypt and Syria:

“In Egypt, the U.S. could afford to abandon Mubarak and let the military keep running the show ... the country was not going to descend into chaos if Mubarak were to be forced out by the deep state. In Syria ... the sectarian nature of the country added to the fact that it’s not really isolated from its neighbors by large tracts of desert the way Egypt is makes the prospect of the Syrian regime collapsing much more dangerous than Mubarak being pushed out ... not to mention Israel actually quite likes Bashar being in power.” [Emphasis added.]

A similar assessment was recently revealed in a [US Marine Corps](#) (USMC) draft strategy document from 2011, which appears to show that the main western interest in (later) supporting parts of the Syrian opposition was to counter Iranian influence, but they did not see “regime change” as a means to this end—they believed any attempt at “regime change” would have catastrophic consequences—arguing instead that the best outcome was for the “Alawite regime” to remain without Assad.

“Yemeni solution”

Why then did Obama begin calling on Assad to “step aside” in August? Despite thousands of killings, the uprising was only growing in strength and intensity, refugees were pouring across borders, and agitation throughout the region in solidarity with the largely Sunni-based uprising was encouraging more radical voices, especially from the Gulf, as the slaughter got more horrific. The US quest for stability by avoiding regime collapse had hit a dilemma: the actions of the regime itself were increasing instability inside Syria and throughout the region.

US governments generally have no special love for particular representatives of regimes they aim to keep in power, once they have become counter-productive. The classic case was the US-orchestrated coup against and assassination of South Vietnamese dictator Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963—a much more violent act than a mere call on Assad to step aside. Yet far from wanting to overthrow the South Vietnamese regime as a whole, the US spent the next

twelve years waging one of history's most terrible wars in its defense.

Thus a so-called "[Yemeni solution](#)" in Syria—named after the arrangement in Yemen whereby longtime dictator Ali Abdallah Saleh ceded power in 2011 to his deputy Abdrabbuh Hadi to preserve a cosmetically reformed regime—was spelled out in July 2012, when US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta stressed that when Assad leaves, "the best way to preserve stability is to maintain as much of the military and police as you can, [along with security forces](#), and hope that they will transition to a democratic form of government." That's quite a hope to have about the security forces of the Assad regime.

Far from "regime change," then, the US government has all along pushed for a "political solution" to facilitate this regime preservation strategy, in partnership with Russia.

The Geneva I and II conferences in 2012 and 2014 outlined the parameters of the process: the formation of a "[transitional governing body](#)," composed of "members of the present government and the opposition ... formed on the basis of mutual consent," tasked with organizing elections. Despite Rana and Bâli's assertion that "[US policy-makers opposed an inclusive diplomatic solution](#) in favor of an 'Assad must go' approach," the US was fully signed onto this Geneva process, which made no mention of Assad at all.

Likewise, the G8 communiqué of June 2013, while re-stating the Geneva parameters and again not mentioning Assad, [added](#) a call on both the regime and the rebels "to commit to destroying and expelling from Syria all organizations and

individuals affiliated to al-Qaeda and any other non-state actors linked to terrorism.”

Western governments believed that Assad himself, and his immediate entourage, would not be part of the transitional regime, because otherwise the opposition would not take part, there would be no “mutual consent;” likewise, the regime could decide which members of the opposition were unacceptable. However, the US did not use this to sabotage the process. On the contrary, the US put great pressure on the opposition to attend the January 2014 Geneva II conference, but around half of the Syrian insurgency’s representatives rejected this pressure and refused to attend merely due to Assad’s presence there to negotiate, never mind his presence in a hypothetical transitional government.

In any case, in the late Obama period, the US, closely cooperating with Russia in the diplomatic field, decided that ~~even Assad himself could remain~~ during the “transitional” period.

US: Assad step aside, but who are the rebels?

The US never intended to apply any serious military pressure to bring about even the limited objectives outlined above. Only a strengthened opposition could exert such pressure, but the rebels were fighting to overthrow the dictatorship and were no proxies; if strengthened enough they would push beyond the US-imposed limits.

It was one thing to decide the regime's slaughter had become too destabilizing, but quite another to support the rebels. Despite the constant discourse about "US-backed rebels," US leaders continually made clear what they thought of them.

In early 2012, Hillary Clinton stated that to arm the rebels would effectively be to support al-Qaeda, and even Hamas, which "is now supporting the opposition." If "you're trying to figure out do you have the elements of an opposition ~~that is actually viable, that we don't see.~~" The Republican arch-neocon John Bolton warned of "~~an imminent risk of humanitarian disaster if Assad falls,~~" adding that "we must not permit terrorists like Al Qaeda or Hezbollah in next-door Lebanon, rogue states or a radical Syrian successor regime to acquire" Assad's advanced weaponry.

On August 13, 2013, CIA Deputy Director Michael Morell said that the potential overthrow of Assad was the ~~largest threat to US national security,~~ and that Assad's chemical weapons "are going to be up for grabs and up for sale" in the event of his ouster. Several days later, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin Dempsey, said that the Obama administration was opposed to "even limited" US military intervention in Syria as ~~no side represented US interests.~~ Later that year, voices grew among establishment figures declaring an Assad victory the most preferable outcome: ~~former CIA head Michael Hayden~~ and former chief of staff of the ~~Israeli Defense Forces, Dan Halutz,~~ said as much just days apart.

In early 2014, looking at a variety of possible outcomes, the Rand Corporation think-tank concluded that "the collapse of the Syrian regime would be ~~the worst of all possible~~

outcomes from the point of view of US interests.” In 2015, CIA Director John Brennan declared that ~~the US does not want to see a chaotic collapse~~ of the Syrian regime, as it has reason to worry about who might replace Assad. Soon after, the New York Times ran an editorial which proclaimed that “Mr. Assad has become a necessary, if still unpalatable, ~~potential ally in combating the Islamic State.~~”

Obama’s famous dismissal of the ~~rebels as a bunch of farmers, teachers, dentists~~, pharmacists and radio reporters crystallized the US view of the rebels.

Providing and blocking arms

Why then did the US eventually begin to provide arms to the opposition? Most observers recognize that US military aid was never of the quantity or quality necessary to enable the rebels to win, but, moreover, it was not even at a level sufficient to enhance tactical rebel victories on the ground, nor to create a permanent “balance” with the regime so that “no-one wins,” as is often claimed; even such limited objectives would have required a more consistent amount of better weaponry, given what the regime possessed militarily.

The reality is that the bare survival of the FSA was the purpose of US aid under Obama.

Western policy-makers understood that Assad could not completely crush the uprising, given the real divisions among the population and the regime’s sectarian

exploitation of them. Therefore, if the FSA were destroyed, many among the dispossessed Sunni majority might gravitate to Sunni Islamist and jihadist forces.

Therefore, it was preferable that the ideologically heterogeneous FSA should survive, but be sufficiently weakened to facilitate the co-optation of moderate political leaderships as partners for the political solution. Backing the FSA was thus similar to backing the ideologically heterogeneous Fatah in Palestine; if weakened enough, a Syrian Mahmoud Abbas may emerge.

So, what kind of military aid did the US provide to the anti-Assad rebels?

Despite Bâli and Rana's [assertion](#) that "beginning in late 2011, the Obama administration pursued a strategy of arming local proxies" to defeat Assad, the US in fact provided no arms to the rebels in the first two years of the war; most weaponry in the hands of the FSA was gained by capture or [made in back-yards](#). As one (more honestly titled) article put it: "[Syria's 'Western-Backed' Rebels? Not in Weapons.](#)"

Until late 2013, the US provided only non-lethal aid (which was [regularly cut off](#)), such as binoculars, radios, "ready-meals," [and tents](#).

By mid-2012, however, a flow of weapons from former Libyan rebels began to reach the Syrian opposition via Turkey, involving Qatari and Muslim Brotherhood networks. Later that year the US began its first significant intervention in Syria, positioning CIA agents on the Turkish and Jordanian borders to [restrict](#) the quality, quantity, and

destination of these arms.

While warplanes and helicopters had replaced tanks as the main tools of regime slaughter by mid-2012, both anti-aircraft and [anti-tank weaponry](#) were denied the rebels by this US embargo. For the most part, only relatively light weaponry was allowed through, in the face of a massively armed regime continually supplied by Russia and Iran. At times, [the US blocked any and all weapons](#) getting to the FSA from its regional allies.

The US embargo on anti-aircraft weapons remains in place to this day; given that Assad has been waging an air war since 2012, this is a fundamental aspect of US intervention. Even when FSA groups tried to buy portable anti-aircraft missiles (MANPADS) on the black market, “somehow, [the Americans found out and our purchase was blocked.](#)”

The CIA and Pentagon arms programs

Beginning in late 2013, however, the US did begin supplying some “vetted” anti-Assad rebel groups with [light arms](#) under the CIA’s “Timber Sycamore” program. As these were arms of the quality they already had via manufacture or capture, the US could attempt to contain and co-opt the uprising without any “danger” of strengthening it.

Importantly, this needs to be distinguished from the Pentagon’s program to arm and train some rebel groups to fight ISIS, beginning with a \$500 million program in late 2014. The Pentagon’s number one condition for

participation was that fighters ~~give up the fight against Assad~~, and agree to fight ISIS only; that is, “rebels who don’t rebel.” This is the reason the US was only able to attract a few miniscule groups, such as the ill-fated “Division 30,” ~~whose sum total of 54 troops~~ were captured by Nusra as soon as they arrived in 2015. Therefore, the only significant force the Pentagon ended up working with was the Kurdish-led YPG, which already met the precondition of not fighting the Assad regime.

As we have seen above, claims that the CIA program cost billions of dollars are too inconsistent to be of much value; the program after all was secret. As we will see below, the ultimate aim of the program was not all that different to that of the Pentagon. For now, though, it is worth examining what this program actually meant on the ground.

In the first place, there was often a difference between what weaponry reached storehouses on the borders, and what was actually dispatched to the rebels. The fact that the aim was little more than ensuring bare survival is exemplified by reports of rebels being supplied ~~16 bullets a month~~. In the town of Ibdita in Idlib, rebel leader Abu Mar’iye ~~complained~~ “we are licking our plates. We beg for salt. It’s not enough. Even the weapons that arrive, it’s like a drop, just enough so the fighting continues, so we can kill each other but not win.”

A CIA training program accompanied the supply of light arms. While much has been made of the alleged training of several thousand rebels, what this was actually about has been little studied.

The first training began before the arms program. The

Guardian reported in mid-2013 that “western training of Syrian rebels is under way in Jordan in an effort to strengthen secular elements in the opposition as a bulwark against Islamic extremism, and to begin building security forces to maintain order [in the event of Bashar al-Assad’s fall](#).” However, there had been no “green light” for the trainees to be sent into Syria, because their purpose was not to fight the regime. Rather, “they would be deployed if there were signs of a complete collapse of public services in the southern Syrian city of Daraa, which could trigger a million more Syrians seeking refuge in Jordan... The aim of sending western-trained rebels over the border would be to create a safe area for refugees on the Syrian side of the border, to prevent chaos and to provide a counterweight to al-Qaeda-linked extremists who have become a powerful force in the north.”

From late 2013, it was nonetheless alleged that trainees were being sent back to Syria; by 2015, there were claims that [some 3-5,000 had undergone training](#). However, many rebels felt the main American interest in this was [surveillance](#)—of them. Abu Matar, a fighter with the FSA’s Harakat Hazm coalition, received such training in Qatar. Claiming he had already spent more than two years fighting, and so “didn’t learn anything new,” he asserted “they just wanted to see us.” “See what our thinking is,” added his comrade Abu Iskandaroon.

In a Frontline documentary about an unnamed rebel group that received three weeks of training in Qatar, the commander explained that “their American contacts had asked him to bring 80 to 90 members of his unit to Ankara” before being flown to Qatar. “Once in Ankara ... they were [interrogated for days about their political leanings and their](#)

[unit's fighting history.](#)" After learning how to conduct ambushes and the like, the fighters explained that "they cannot win without anti-aircraft missiles against Assad[']s superior air war," one adding that, "when I saw there was no training in anti-aircraft missiles, my morale was destroyed."

The rise and fall of the TOW

The program took a more significant turn during 2014, when the US lifted its embargo on anti-tank weapons and some rebel groups began receiving US-made TOW anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), mainly from pre-existing stocks held by Saudi Arabia. Officially, all foreign recipients of US arms require Washington's approval before transferring them to third parties; this approval had been withheld until 2014.

Of course, to begin this two years after tanks had been superseded by aircraft as the main killer was doubly too late; nevertheless, ground warfare continued to play a crucial role, so this may be seen as a significant improvement in the quality of US-supplied weaponry.

Why was the embargo lifted? In fact, the same pattern applied as with small arms. By the time the first TOWs were sent, the rebels had already acquired a large range of ATGMs, which had [already taken out 1,800 tanks by late 2013](#). Nearly all were [Russian or East European made](#), which is to say that, for the most part, the rebels had captured them from the Syrian army.

So again: as the rebels were already acquiring them, opening an official supply allowed for influence for future co-optation and some US control of who gets what, while not qualitatively upping the supply of rebel weaponry. In fact, the TOW is reportedly ~~less efficient~~ than Russian-made Konkurs and Kornets which the rebels had captured from the regime.

The first reports of TOWs supplied to the FSA's Harakat Hazm emerged in April 2014. Groups received only three or four at a time, which Hazm cadre reported were "~~no better than the Russian weapons~~" they captured from the regime; they had to apply for them for specific operations, and return the shells to make a claim for more, which may or may not be approved. The number of "vetted" groups receiving TOWs ~~soon spread to nine~~, who received "a few dozen" between them, "resulting in ~~a minimal effect on the battlefield.~~"

Even favored groups soon ~~found supplies dwindling~~, and by the end of the year it was ~~down to only four groups~~, with ~~few weapons~~ actually being delivered to anyone. What occurred in between?

The US diktat: fight the jihadists

To understand this, we need to take a step back. In late 2012, rebel commanders met US intelligence officers to discuss receiving arms, but ~~the US officers only wanted to discuss drone strikes on Nusra~~, and enlisting the rebels to join the attack. The FSA members said that unity against

Assad's more powerful forces was paramount at present, but the US officers replied, "We'd prefer you fight Al Nusra now, and then fight Assad's army" [later].

The FSA in fact fought [many defensive battles against Nusra](#), but did not want to open a full front against it, as in the context this would lead to mutual destruction, and only the regime would gain. FSA Colonel Abd al-Jabbar al-Akaidi remarked that the US wanted to turn the FSA "into the Sahwa," Referring to the Iraqi militants who fought off al-Qaeda in western Iraq with US support in the late 2000s. but "if they help us so that we kill each other, [then we don't want their help.](#)"

In the event, the FSA needed no encouragement to fight ISIS, against whom it ["declared war"](#) in July 2013. In January 2014, Syrian rebels launched [a nation-wide coordinated attack on ISIS](#), driving it permanently from the whole of western Syria, and temporarily from parts of the east.

At this point, however, the CIA program began imposing the same condition on arms recipients as the Pentagon: that the rebels fight ISIS only, and "suspend" their fight with the regime. It thus appears that the main difference is that the Pentagon programs began with this condition, thereby greatly limiting potential recruits, whereas the CIA program recruited larger, genuine anti-Assad groups, later using this support to push them in the same direction.

In a video depicting cadre from the al-Ghab Wolves Brigade (part of the large Idlib-based FSA coalition known as the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, or SRF) training in the use of TOWs, a fighter reveals that Washington "only give[s] weapons to those who specifically fight ISIS. [They are not](#)

~~giving us weapons to fight Assad~~, they give us weapons to fight ISIS.”

The problem was that the anti-Assad rebels rejected such diktats. Even though both the SRF and Harakat Hazm had ~~ended all cooperation with Nusra~~ during 2014, they ~~refused to launch a frontal war~~ on it, still less to stop fighting Assad.

A former Hazm member explained: “By September 2014, the United States started to pressure us to leave the battlefield against Assad and to ~~send all our forces to fight ISIS~~. We had no problem to go fight ISIS, but wouldn’t agree to stop fighting Assad. From then on, our relations with the Americans went from bad to worse and eventually they stopped backing us. When Jabhat al-Nusra attacked us, we had already lost all foreign support ... because we dared to disobey the Americans.”

This was further highlighted in September 2014 when the US began bombing ISIS (and also Nusra and even other ~~Islamist rebels such as Ahrar al-Sham~~). Despite their own war on ISIS, most rebel groups condemned the one-sided American war, which essentially gave Assad a free hand. The first TOW recipient, ~~Harakat Hazm, released one of the strongest statements~~, declaring the US air war to be “an attack on national sovereignty harmful to the Syrian revolution.”

It is therefore little wonder that by refusing to be co-opted as proxies by US arms, these northern FSA groups were thrown to the wolves. When Nusra attacked the SRF and Hazm in late 2014, they were crippled by the burden of their former association with the US, which was now bombing Nusra, but with reduced means to resist: ~~“we have~~

~~a huge US flag on our backs, but not a gun in our hand,"~~
reported one rebel leader as both FSA coalitions were
forcibly disbanded.

2015: Supply rebels with TOWs and bomb them?

The TOWs that did reach Idlib's rebels appeared to make a difference, as the latter seized the city of Jisr al-Shughour and made other substantial gains in early 2015. Much media ~~has blown this phase up~~ as evidence of the decisiveness of the TOW. While there is no doubt that the missiles (like other ATGMs) were effective against regime tanks (~~dozens of regime tanks and vehicles were taken out~~ in this offensive), other factors also came into play in that arena, including ~~the unity in action achieved by the Idlib rebellion~~ and its regional backers in early 2015, as well as the element of ~~surprise~~. A few dozen ATGMs can hardly have been the decisive factor when the regime itself possessed not only around ~~9,500 tanks and armored vehicles, but also some 5,000 ATGMs~~, far more than the rebels could ever hope to acquire through their drip-drop supply.

As the ~~TOW-possessing FSA units~~ involved in this offensive fought alongside the Army of Conquest—a coalition of Idlib-based Islamists that included Nusra—much media also tried to make the case that the US, by supplying TOWs, was in effect supporting Nusra. Apart from the fact that it was almost certainly ~~the Saudis who supplied any new TOWs~~ in the north in early 2015, what this discourse neglects is the

almost full-scale war the US was then waging against the Army of Conquest. As if to balance the impact of the TOWs, throughout the first half of 2015, [the US engaged in an air war](#) that [mostly targeted Nusra](#), which was hit dozens of times, but also hit Ahrar al-Sham, [even destroying its headquarters](#), as well as [even more mainstream rebels](#).

Betrayal in the south

Meanwhile, after the TOW program largely dried up in the north, the US and Saudis began increasing their support to the FSA's Southern Front (SF) operating in Daraa and Qunaitra provinces in the south, through the Military Operations Center (MOC) in Jordan, including the supply of [significant numbers of TOWs](#). For example, McClatchy claimed that while only "12 to 14 commanders" in the north were receiving military and non-lethal aid in 2014, ["some 60 smaller groups are recipients in southern Syria."](#) A 2015 Washington Post article quoted US officials saying the CIA program intended "to bolster a coalition of militias known as [the Southern Front of the Free Syrian Army](#)."

This shift was seen as arising from US and Western preferences for the democratic, and highly secular, Southern Front, which was overwhelmingly dominant in the south compared to Islamist brigades. This increased support aided the SF in its string of victories in the south in early 2015.

However, soon after these victories, [the US and MOC imposed a series of "red lines:"](#) the SF was ordered not to

advance into the central Daraa city, into neighboring Suwayda, or anywhere north towards the key town of Sasa, and not to advance on Damascus or attempt to link up with its rebel-held outer suburbs (according to [some reports](#), violating this last “red line” would result in US air strikes). By mid-2015, the MOC had [scaled back support for the SF](#). Offensives to take Daraa city, and the al-Tha’la airbase on the Suwayda border, [were unsupported](#), or [even blocked](#), by the MOC.

Moscow’s military intervention, starting September 2015, did lead to a momentary reversal of this trend, when in response Saudi Arabia sent some [500 TOWs to Syria](#), which led to the famous [“tank massacre.”](#) The furious Saudis had promised [a swift response to the Russian invasion](#), so it is likely they would have sent these TOWs regardless of US permission. Even if the US did give permission for a large supply in this instance, to remind Russia it was there, it was a one-off; the US and Russia rapidly negotiated “deconfliction zones” and intelligence sharing, and supplies [of TOWs trickled off in late 2015](#) “and totally vanished in the first two weeks of 2016.”

The US-CIA attempt to co-opt the SF had similar aims to the program in the north. In early 2016, MOC officials told the SF to stop fighting the regime and to [focus their efforts on the jihadists](#), both Nusra and ISIS, and were promised new weaponry if they did so. In May, the MOC warned it would [cut cash flows](#) until they started scoring victories over ISIS in the Yarmouk valley.

In March 2016, the SF took part in the US-Russia-facilitated nation-wide ceasefire. In reality, however, while the regime continued bombing at lower intensity, “maintaining the

ceasefire” became the new rationale for holding back the SF from that point on.

As the distance between the FSA-controlled south and the “Damascus suburbs” is not great, the Southern Front could have pushed towards Damascus and linked up with the rebels in East Ghouta and South Damascus.

Instead, the US “red-line” against moving in that direction facilitated the regime’s 2016 [subjugation of the southern Damascus town of Darayya](#), an iconic revolutionary town in the best democratic traditions of the original uprising. The 2017 “de-escalation zone” converted this US red-line into international policy, helping seal the fate of Ghouta and the greater Damascus rebellion in 2018. Finally, despite this enforced passivity, the SF itself was betrayed later that year in a global deal involving Assad, Russia, Israel, and the US.

By 2016, the last year of the Obama administration, the US tightened its arms embargoes [on all weapons against the rebels](#), while more or less openly [collaborating with Russia](#) against them. Declaring that the US was “not seeking so-called regime change as it is known in Syria,” US Secretary of State John Kerry added that the US and Russia see the conflict “[fundamentally very similarly](#).”

Trump

And that was all before Trump. While ending the now-paltry assistance to anti-Assad rebels, Trump upped the Pentagon

program. On the one hand, the bombing of ISIS reached terrible heights; yes, the US largely defeated ISIS in Syria (and Assad has the US to thank for that), but at the cost of the complete [destruction of Raqqa](#), and the killing of some 2,000 civilians. The number of civilians killed by US bombing in Iraq and Syria [in Trump's first six months](#) was higher than in all of Obama's eight years combined, including [472 killed by US airstrikes](#) in Syria between May 23 and June 23 alone.

Yet, curiously, it is Trump's two minor strikes on the Assad regime, rather than the enormously destructive war on ISIS, that are widely seen as "escalation," even though both were explicitly in response to Assad's use of chemical weapons (the regime has been free to use every conceivable "conventional" weapon), neither caused any significant damage to Assad's war machine, and neither resulted in any casualties.

In April 2017, Assad risked the use of Sarin in Khan Shaykhun, in Idlib, as he was encouraged by the Trump administration's orientation: in the very weeks before this atrocity, [three prominent US leaders](#) made Trump's [pro-Assad position](#) even clearer.

When Assad took this to mean that even Sarin could be legitimized, the US struck Assad's Shayrat airbase for the sake of its own "credibility." As Trump had tipped off Putin, who likely tipped off Assad, the base would have been cleared of better aircraft, and suffered minimal damage.

In the follow-up, US leaders scrambled to emphasize the one-off nature of the hit; National Security Advisor Herbert McMaster clarified that the US had no concern that the base

was being used again the very next day, as harming Assad's military capacities was not the aim of the strike; and that far from "regime change," the US desired a "~~change in the nature of the Assad regime~~ and its behavior in particular."

Trump also intensified Obama's bombing of Nusra in Idlib. Over December 2016 and January 2017 ~~the US killed hundreds of its cadres~~, while also ~~bombing Ahrar al-Sham~~, Nusra's main rival. A comparison between the US bombing of a mosque in Idlib in March (allegedly targeting Nusra), ~~where 57 worshippers were killed~~ (Russia defended this ~~as aimed at "terrorists"~~), and the US strike on the regime air base a few weeks later, which killed no-one, highlights the real focus of the US war.

In July, State Secretary Rex Tillerson clarified that ~~the only fight in Syria is with ISIS~~, and that ~~Assad's future is Russia's issue~~, while discouraging the opposition from fighting Assad: "We call upon all parties, including the Syrian government and its allies, Syrian opposition forces, and Coalition forces carrying out the battle to defeat ISIS, ~~to avoid conflict with one another.~~"

In the southeast desert, where the US was arming and training two "vetted" brigades for the war against ISIS, US Central Command stated that "~~vetted Syrian opposition groups all swear an oath to fight only ISIS~~," leading one of the brigades to ~~end its relationship with the US~~; the ~~US even threatened to bomb them~~ if they didn't return their weaponry. When the remaining loyal faction responded militarily to pro-Assad forces which had attacked them inside a US-declared safe zone, the ~~US Command gave permission to Assad to bomb its own proxy forces~~ inside its

zone!

Where to from here?

Bâli and Rana assess that the US must now “engage in both immediate and more long-term efforts [to find an inclusive political settlement](#).” They don’t explain why the regime—the prime obstacle to any such an “inclusive” settlement—would agree to one without significant pressure; indeed their thesis claims there has already been too much pressure on Damascus. In any case, it is precisely such an “inclusive political settlement” that renewed US pressure is aimed at achieving.

It may seem ironic that, after all these years of essentially facilitating Assad’s victory, right up to the reconquest of the south in mid-2018, the US government soon after appeared to articulate an unusually firm-sounding policy on Assad’s future. In September, the aforementioned US special representative for Syria, Jim Jeffrey, [threatened harsh sanctions against the regime](#) (and potentially even its backers in Iran and Russia) if it holds up the process of political transition, and re-stated the Western consensus that “there will be no reconstruction assistance ... for the Syrian government absent irreversible progress in the UN-sponsored political process.”

The argument of this essay is not that US leaders loved Assad, whose actions have bred massive instability, but rather that they feared the “instability” of revolution more. With the revolution now largely crushed (or at least no

longer posing any danger to the regime), Jeffrey's tough-sounding approach may indicate that the US now considers it safe to resume the search for a transition to a less destabilizing version of the regime, carried out "from above." However, with the military crushing of the opposition ensuring that it lacks bargaining power; with hundreds of revolutionary councils disbanded; ~~thousands of civil leaders murdered in custody~~; a quarter of the population residing outside the country; and with Russian, Iranian, American, and Turkish forces occupying substantial parts of the country, this will likely be a particularly conservative version of "inclusivity."

Moreover, while the apparent toughness of the approach sounds novel, in reality this is well within the parameters discussed. Jeffrey's threat concerns any attempt by Assad to block the formation of a "constitutional commission" to re-write the constitution before future elections; i.e., the process launched by Assad's allies Russia and Iran, along with Turkey, ~~at the Sochi conference in January 2018~~, consistent with ~~UN Security Council resolution 2254~~ (a resolution endorsed by Russia and China in 2015). The regime is also officially on board and has already ~~sent the UN its list of nominees~~, though of course it is also trying to ~~stall the process~~. It is somewhat ironic that the US now offers muscle to help push through a Russian-led process; the key difference appears to be that the US is critical of delays in forming the committee, while ~~Russia wants to give Damascus more time~~.

Compare this tactical difference to the view of the Syrian opposition, which has been only lukewarm, at best, on both ~~the constitutional commission process~~ and ~~Resolution 2254~~. The former head of the of the National Coalition for Syrian

Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, Moaz al-Khatib, has noted that the acceptance of “the meager demand of a mere constitutional committee” ~~is a major step down~~ from the key long-term component of the Geneva process, namely “the demand for a transitional ruling body.” He described the obsession with the constitution as a priority of Western governments rather than the Syrian people. Essentially, the regime itself will be expected to ratify the new constitution after the lengthy process of its creation, and then organize “elections” under the new rules.

The Trump administration’s position is therefore only “tough” in the context of a policy that already represents a marked shift towards accommodating the regime, compared to the Obama era, when the idea of a transitional ruling body still held nominal sway. Indeed, later in 2018, Jeffrey’s own tone began to be modified markedly. In his November 29 address to the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Syria, he stressed that the US was committed to a political process that “will ~~change the nature and the behavior of the Syrian government~~ ... [but] this is not regime change, this is not related to personalities.” When it comes to the change in “behavior,” Jeffrey’s overwhelming stress was on the removal of all “Iranian-led” forces from Syria, which he assessed threaten “our friends in the region, principally Israel.” This is very different to his attitude to Assad’s other main ally, Russia; Jeffrey states that “~~we seek common ground with Russia~~ in order to resolve the conflict in Syria” and called on Russia to “join efforts to counter Iran’s destabilizing actions and influence in Syria to remove all Iranian-commanded forces from the country.”

This points to the obsessive anti-Iranian stance of the

Trump administration: threatening talk from the likes of National Security Advisor John [Bolton](#) and State Secretary Mike [Pompeo](#) focuses heavily on the Iranian presence rather than the regime itself (indeed, as noted above, Bolton has always opposed removing Assad), highlighting geo-strategic rather than human rights motivations. This raises [the possibility of another deal](#), such as that in the south. Commenting on Bolton's assertion that the US will not pull its 2,000 troops out of Syria until Iran withdraws, Assistant Secretary of Defense Robert Karem and Brig. Gen. Scott Benedict recently told a congressional panel that while the US presence was limited to defeating ISIS, the troops in northeast Syria provide the "secondary benefit" of expanding US "leverage" in the Syrian outcome. As Spencer Ackerman writes, "their testimony in the context of Bolton's comments suggested that at some point, [the U.S. will seek to barter that territory to Assad](#) in exchange for some form of Iranian withdrawal." Such a deal may serve as part of an anti-Iranian war drive that has little to do with Syria and serves alternative interests.

Still, it would be one-sided to focus solely on these cynical motivations of the most rabid war-loving leaders in the Trump regime. Around the same time as the above was going on, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee cleared the way for [the "Caesar" sanctions](#) to hold Assad accountable for his war crimes and impede his ability [to use funds from elsewhere](#) to continue his oppression, though the bill still needs to get through the Senate and the president.

Credit for this bill—named after the alias of the Syrian regime defector who leaked tens of thousands of photos of detainees tortured and mass-murdered in Assad's

gulag—must ultimately go to the years of democratic activism by Syrians and their supporters pressuring Western governments to take the same kinds of actions that activists have previously pushed for against Western-backed tyrannical regimes, from the likes of Pinochet and Suharto to Israel’s bloody occupation. As such, the bill is entirely supportable.

Despite [Norton’s absurd claim](#) that the \$7.7 billion in US humanitarian aid should be considered part of “regime-change” funding, in reality [most US aid goes through the UN](#), and, for too many years, international aid via the [UN has in fact bolstered the Assad regime](#).

A regime that has killed hundreds of thousands of people, destroyed countless cities and towns across the country through years of attacks with barrel bombs, cluster munitions, napalm, ballistic missiles, and chemical weapons, [uprooting over half its population](#), including 6.5 million refugees residing outside the country, should not be legitimized with funds to allegedly “reconstruct” what it has destroyed. Apart from the fact that a regime so completely corrupt and dysfunctional to its core would fleece a great proportion of any such funding for its cronies, the record of “reconstruction” to date has included [erecting monuments to itself](#) and [building new luxury cities](#) on the ruins of former working-class shanties the residents of which have been dispossessed.

Instead, humanitarian aid should be the focus. Full humanitarian access to all of Syria must be demanded, and funding to democratic councils [and civil society](#) in the northwest should be restored and bolstered, while the two main regions outside regime control—the rebel-controlled

northwest and Kurdish-controlled northeast—should be protected. At present they remain free due to the somewhat conflicting interests of Turkey in the northwest and the US in the northeast, but this leaves them at the mercy of these powers' interests should deals be done. The principle of the right of self-defense of civilian populations—especially against air power—should be enshrined, and all necessary means to enable this delivered to popular democratic forces in these regions.

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