



What US Congress Researchers Reveal about Washington's « Regime Change » Designs on Syria

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Seeing the government in Damascus as too far to the left, Washington has been trying to orchestrate a regime change in Syria since at least 2003

Documents prepared by US Congress researchers as early as 2005 revealed that the US government was actively weighing regime change in Syria long before the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, challenging the view that US support for the Syrian rebels is based on allegiance to a “democratic uprising” and showing that it is simply an extension of a long-standing policy of seeking to topple the government in Damascus. Indeed, the researchers made clear that the US government’s motivation to overthrow the government of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad is unrelated to democracy promotion in the Middle East. In point of fact, they noted that Washington’s preference is for secular dictatorships (Egypt) and monarchies (Jordan and Saudi Arabia.) [1] The impetus for pursuing regime change, according to the researchers, was a desire to sweep away an impediment to the achievement of US goals in the Middle East related to strengthening Israel, consolidating US domination of Iraq, and fostering free-market, free enterprise economies. Democracy was never a consideration.

The researchers revealed further that an invasion of Syria by US forces was contemplated following the US-led aggression against Iraq in 2003, but that the unanticipated heavy burden of pacifying Iraq militated against an additional expenditure of blood and treasure in Syria. [2] As an alternative to direct military intervention to topple the Syrian government, the United States chose to pressure Damascus through sanctions and support for the internal Syrian opposition.

The documents also revealed that nearly a decade before the rise of Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra that the US government recognized that Islamic fundamentalists were the main opposition to the secular Assad government and worried about the re-emergence of an Islamist insurgency that could lead Sunni fundamentalists to power in Damascus. A more recent document from the Congress’s researchers describes a US strategy that seeks to eclipse an Islamist take-over by forcing a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Syria in which the policing, military, judicial and administrative functions of the Syrian state are preserved, while Assad and his fellow Arab nationalists are forced to leave office. The likelihood is that if this scenario plays out that Assad and his colleagues will be replaced by biddable US surrogates willing to facilitate the achievement of US goals.

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In 2005, Congress's researchers reported that a consensus had developed in Washington that change in Syria needed to be brought about, but that there remained divisions on the means by which change could be effected. "Some call for a process of internal reform in Syria or alternatively for the replacement of the current Syrian regime," the report said. [3] Whichever course Washington would settle on, it was clear that the US government was determined to shift the policy framework in Damascus.

The document described the Assad government as an impediment "to the achievement of US goals in the region." [4] These goals were listed as: resolving "the Arab-Israeli conflict;" fighting "international terrorism;" reducing "weapons proliferation;" inaugurating "a peaceful, democratic and prosperous Iraqi state;" and fostering market-based, free enterprise economies. [5]

Stripped of their elegant words, the US objectives for the Middle East amounted to a demand that Damascus capitulate to the military hegemony of Israel and the economic hegemony of Wall Street. To be clear, what this meant was that in order to remove itself as an impediment to the achievement of US goals—and hence as an object of US hostility—Syria would have to:

- o Accept Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state on territory seized from Palestinians, and quite possibly also Syrians and Lebanese, possibly within borders that include the Golan Heights, annexed from Syria by Israel in 1987 and occupied by Israel since 1967.
- o End its support for militant groups seeking Palestinian self-determination and sever its connections with the resistance organization Hezbollah, the main bulwark against Israeli expansion into Lebanon.
- o Leave itself effectively defenceless against the aggressions of the United States and its Middle East allies, including Israel, by abandoning even the capability of producing weapons of mass destruction (while conceding a right to Israel and the United States to maintain vast arsenals of WMD.)
- o Terminate its opposition to US domination of neighboring Iraq.
- o Transform what the US Congress's researchers called Syria's mainly publicly-owned economy, "still based largely on Soviet models," [6] into a sphere of exploitation for US corporations and investors.

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US government objections to Syrian policy, then, can be organized under three US-defined headings:

- o Terrorism.
- o WMD.
- o Economic reform.

These headings translate into:

- o Support for Palestinian and Lebanese resistance groups.
- o Self-defense.
- o Economic sovereignty.

Terrorism (support for Palestinian and Lebanese resistance groups)

The researchers noted that while Syria had “not been implicated directly in an act of terrorism since 1986” that “Syria has continued to provide support and safe haven for Palestinian groups” seeking self-determination, allowing “them to maintain offices in Damascus.” This was enough for the US government to label Syria a state sponsor of terrorism. The researchers went on to note that on top of supporting Palestinian “terrorists” that Damascus also supported Lebanese “terrorists” by permitting “Iranian resupply via Damascus of the Lebanese Shiite Muslim militia Hezbollah in Lebanon.” [7]

US Secretary of State Colin Powell travelled to Damascus on May 3, 2003 to personally issue a demand to the Syrian government that it sever its connections with militant organizations pursuing Palestinian self-determination and to stop providing them a base in Damascus from which to operate. In “testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on February 12, 2004, Powel complained that ‘Syria has not done what we demanded of it with respect to closing permanently of these offices and getting these individuals out of Damascus’.”

The Syrian government rejected the characterization of Hezbollah and Palestinian militants as “terrorists,” noting that the actions of these groups represented legitimate resistance. [8] Clearly, Washington had attempted to discredit the pursuit of Palestinian self-determination and Lebanese sovereignty by labelling the champions of these causes as terrorists.

WMD (self-defense)

In a speech to the Heritage Foundation on May 6, 2002, then US Under Secretary (of State John) Bolton grouped Syria with Libya and Cuba as rogue states that...are pursuing the development of WMD.” [9] Later that year, Bolton echoed his earlier accusation, telling the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Bush administration was very concerned about Syrian nuclear and missile programs. By September 2003, Bolton was warning of a “range of Syrian WMD programs. [10]

Syria clearly had chemical weapons (now destroyed), though hardly in the same quantities as the much larger arsenals of the United States, Russia and (likely) its regional nemesis, Israel. [11] Citing the Washington Post, Congress’s researchers noted that Syria had “sought to build up its CW and missile capabilities as a ‘force equalizer’ to counter Israeli nuclear capabilities.” [12] It should be noted, however, that the idea that chemical weapons can act as a force equalizer to nuclear weapons is not only untenable, but risible. In WWI it took 70,000 tons of gas to produce as many fatalities as were produced at Hiroshima by a single US atom bomb. [13] To have any meaning at all, the concept of WMD must include weapons that kill massive numbers of people (nuclear weapons) and exclude those that don’t (chemical weapons.) Otherwise, it is a propaganda term used to magnify the non-threat posed by countries seeking independence outside the US orbit which have CW and biological weapons, but which weapons are no match for the United States’ nuclear weapons and are dwarfed by the Pentagon’s own CW and BW arsenals. Deceptively labelling these weapons as WMD, makes a non-threat a large threat that must be dealt with through military intervention and thereby provides a public relations rationale for a war of aggression.

As to the substance of Bolton’s assertion that Syria had a wide range of WMD programs, the CIA was unable to produce any evidence to corroborate his claim. Alfred Prados, author of a

2005 Congressional Research Service report titled "Syria: U.S. Relations and Bilateral Issues," listed CIA assessments of Syrian nuclear and BW programs but none of the assessments contained any concrete evidence that Syria actually had such programs. For example, the CIA noted that it was "monitoring Syrian nuclear intentions with concern" but offered nothing beyond "intentions" to show that Damascus was working to acquire a nuclear weapons capability. Prados also noted that Syria had "probably also continued to develop a BW capability," this based on the fact that Damascus had "signed, but not ratified, the Biological Weapons Convention." Prados conceded that "Little information is available on Syrian biological programs."

US president George H.W. Bush is responsible for rendering the concept of WMD meaningless by expanding it to include chemical agents. Before Bush, WMD was a term to denote nuclear weapons or weapons of similar destructive capacity that might be developed in the future. Bush debased the definition in order to go to war with Iraq. He needed to transform the oil-rich Arab country from being seen accurately as a comparatively weak country militarily to being seen inaccurately as a significant threat because it possessed weapons now dishonestly rebranded as being capable of producing mass destruction. It was an exercise in war propaganda.

In 1989, Bush pledged to eliminate the United States' chemical weapons by 1999. Seventeen years later, the Pentagon is still sitting on the world's largest stockpile of militarized chemical agents. US allies Israel and Egypt also have chemical weapons. In 2003, Syria proposed to the United Nations Security Council that the Middle East become a chemical weapons-free zone. The proposal was blocked by the United States, likely in order to shelter Israel from having to give up its store of chemical arms. Numerous calls to declare the Middle East a nuclear weapons-free zone have also been blocked by Washington to shelter Israel from having to give up its nuclear arsenal.

Bolton, it will be recalled, was among the velociraptors of the Bush administration to infamously and falsely accuse Saddam Hussein's Iraq of holding on to WMD that the UN Security Council had demanded it dismantle. In effect, Iraq was ordered to disarm itself, and when it did, was falsely accused by the United States of still being armed as a pretext for US forces to invade the now defenceless country. Bolton may have chosen to play the same WMD card against Syria for the same reason: to manufacture consent for an invasion. But as Congress's researchers pointed out, "Although some officials...advocated a 'regime change strategy' in Syria" through military means, "military operations in Iraq...forced US policy makers to explore additional options," [14] rendering Bolton's false accusations academic.

Since the only legitimate WMD are nuclear weapons, and since there is no evidence that Syria has even the untapped capability of producing them, much less possesses them, Syria has never been a WMD-state or a threat to the US goal of reducing WMD proliferation. What's more, the claim that Washington holds this as a genuine goal is contestable, since it has blocked efforts to make the Middle East a chemical- and nuclear-weapons-free zone, in order to spare its protégé, Israel. It would be more accurate to say that the United States has a goal of reducing weapons proliferation among countries it may one day invade, in order to make the invasion easier. Moreover, there's an egregious US double-standard here. Washington maintains the world's largest arsenals of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, but demands that countries it opposes should abandon their own, or foreswear their development. This is obviously self-serving and has nothing whatever to do with fostering peace and everything to do with promoting US world domination. One US grievance with Assad's Syria, then, is that it refused to accept the international dictatorship

of the United States.

Economic reform (economic sovereignty)

In connection with Syria impeding the achievement of US goals in the Middle East, the Congressional Research Service made the following points in 2005 about the Syrian economy: It is “largely state-controlled;” it is “dominated by...(the) public sector, which employs 73% of the labour force;” and it is “still based largely on Soviet models.” [15] These departures from the preferred Wall Street paradigm of free markets and free enterprise appear, from the perspective of Congress’s researchers, to be valid reasons for the US government to attempt to bring about “reform” in Syria. Indeed, no one should be under the illusion that the US government is prepared to allow foreign governments to exercise sovereignty in setting their own direction economically. That this is the case is evidenced by the existence of a raft of US sanctions legislation against “non-market states.” (See the Congressional Research Service 2016 report, “North Korea: Economic Sanctions,” for a detailed list of sanctions imposed on North Korea for having a “Marxist-Leninist” economy.)

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To recapitulate the respective positions of Syria and the United States on issues of bilateral concern to the two countries:

On Israel. To accept Israel’s right to exist as a settler state on land illegitimately acquired through violence and military conquest from Palestinians, Lebanese (the Shebaa Farms) and Syrians (Golan), would be to collude in the denial of the fundamental right of self-determination. Damascus has refused to collude in the negation of this right. Washington demands it.

On Hezbollah. Hezbollah is the principal deterrent against Israeli territorial expansion into Lebanon and Israeli aspirations to turn the country into a client state. Damascus’s support for the Lebanese resistance organization, and Washington’s opposition to it, places the Assad government on the right side of the principle of self-determination and successive US governments on the wrong side.

On WMD. Syria has a right to self-defense through means of its own choosing and the demand that it abandon its right is not worthy of discussion. The right to self-defense is a principle the United States and its allies accept as self-evident and non-negotiable. It is not a principle that is valid only for the United States and its satellites.

On opposition to the US invasion of Iraq. The 2003 US-led aggression against Iraq was an international crime on a colossal scale, based on an illegitimate casus belli, and a fabricated one at that, and which engendered massive destruction and loss of life. It was the supreme international crimes by the standards of the Nuremberg trials. Applying the Nuremberg principles, the perpetrators would be hanged. US aggression against Iraq, including the deployment of “sanctions of mass destruction” through the 1990s, which led to hundreds of thousands of Iraqi deaths, and was blithely accepted by then US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright as “worth it,” was undertaken despite the absence of any threat to the United States. The deliberate creation of humanitarian calamities in the absence of a threat, as a matter of choice and not necessity, in pursuit of economic gain, is an iniquity on a signal scale. What, then, are we to think of a government in Damascus that opposed this iniquity, and a government in Washington that demands that Damascus reverse its

opposition and accept the crime as legitimate?

Whatever its failings, the Assad government has unambiguously adopted positions that have traditionally been understood to be concerns of the political left: support for self-determination; public ownership and planning of the economy; opposition to wars of aggression; and anti-imperialism. This is not to say that on a spectrum from right to left that the Assad government occupies a position near the left extreme; far from it. But from Washington's point of view, Damascus is far enough to the left to be unacceptable. Indeed, it is the Syrian government's embrace of traditional leftist positions that accounts for why it is in the cross-hairs of the world's major champion of reactionary causes, the United States, even if it isn't the kind of government that is acceptable to Trotskyists and anarchists.

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In 2003, the Bush administration listed Syria as part of a junior varsity axis of evil, along with Cuba and Libya, citing support in Damascus for Hezbollah and groups engaged in armed struggle to achieve Palestinian self-determination. [16] An invasion of Syria following the US take-over of Iraq in 2003 was contemplated, but was called off after the Pentagon discovered its hands were full quelling resistance to its occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. As an alternative to direct military intervention to topple the Syrian government, the United States chose to pressure Assad through sanctions and by strengthening the opposition in Syria, hoping either to force Assad to accept Israel's territorial gains, end support for Hezbollah and Palestinian militant groups, and to remake the economy—or to yield power. However, as Congress's researchers reveal, there were concerns in Washington that if efforts to bolster the opposition went too far, Assad would fall to "a successor regime (which) could be led by Islamic fundamentalists who might adopt policies even more inimical to the United States." [17]

On December 12, 2003, US president George W. Bush signed the Syria Accountability Act, which imposed sanctions on Syria unless, among other things, Damascus halted its support for Hezbollah and Palestinian resistance groups and ceased "development of weapons of mass destruction." The sanctions included bans on exports of military equipment and civilian goods that could be used for military purposes (in other words, practically anything.) This was reinforced with an additional (and largely superfluous) ban on US exports to Syria other than food and medicine, as well as a prohibition against Syrian aircraft landing in or overflying the United States. [18]

On top of these sanctions, Bush imposed two more. Under the USA PATRIOT Act, the US Treasury Department ordered US financial institutions to sever connections with the Commercial Bank of Syria. [19] And under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, the US president froze the assets of Syrians involved in supporting policies hostile to the United States, which is to say, supporting Hezbollah and groups fighting for Palestinian self-determination, refusing to accept as valid territorial gains which Israel had made through wars of aggression, and operating a largely publicly-owned, state-planned economy, based on Soviet models. [20]

In order to strengthen internal opposition to the Syrian government, Bush signed the Foreign Operations Appropriation Act. This act required that a *minimum* of \$6.6 million "be made available for programs supporting democracy in Syria...as well as *unspecified amounts of additional funds* (emphasis added)." [21]

By 2006, Time was reporting that the Bush administration had “been quietly nurturing individuals and parties opposed to the Syrian government in an effort to undermine the regime of President Bashar Assad.” Part of the effort was being run through the National Salvation Front. The Front included “the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist organization that for decades supported the violent overthrow of the Syrian government.” Front representatives “were accorded at least two meetings” at the White House in 2006. Hence, the US government, at its highest level, was colluding with Islamists to bring down the Syrian government at least five years before the eruption of protests in 2011. This is a development that seems to have escaped the notice of some who believe that violent Islamist organizations emerged only after March 2011. In point of fact, the major internal opposition to secular Syrian governments, both before and after March 2011, were and are militant Sunni Islamists. Syria expert Joshua Landis told Time that White House support for the Syrian opposition was “apparently an effort to gin up the Syrian opposition under the rubric of ‘democracy promotion’ and ‘election monitoring,’ but it’s really just an attempt to pressure the Syrian government into doing what the United States wants.” [22]

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The US Congress researchers noted that despite “US calls for democracy in the Middle East, historically speaking, US policymakers” have tended to favor “secular Arab republics (Egypt) and Arab monarchies (Jordan and Saudi Arabia.)” [23] They noted too that since “the rise of political Islam as an opposition vehicle in the Middle East decades ago, culminating in the 1979 overthrow of the Shah of Iran, US policymakers have been concerned that secular Arab dictatorships like Syria would face rising opposition from Islamist groups seeking their overthrow.” [24] “The religiously fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood,” which the Bush administration enlisted to pressure the Assad government, had long been at odds with the secular Syrian government, the researchers noted. [25]

Today, Islamic State operates as one of the largest, if not the largest, rebel groups in Syria. A 2015 Congressional Research Service report cited an “unnamed senior State Department official” who observed:

[W]e’ve never seen something like this. We’ve never seen a terrorist organization with 22,000 foreign fighters from a hundred countries all around the world. To put it in context—again, the numbers are fuzzy—but it’s about double of what went into Afghanistan over 10 years in the war against the Soviet Union. Those Jihadi fighters were from a handful of countries. [26]

Islamic State differs from other militant Islamist opponents of the Syrian government in seeking to control territory, not only in Syria, but in Iraq and beyond. As such, it constitutes a threat to US domination of Iraq and influence throughout the Middle East and north Africa. In contrast, ideologically similar groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, limit the scope of their operations to Syria. They, therefore, constitute a threat to the Syrian government alone, and have proved, as a consequence, to be more acceptable to Washington.

The US government has publicly drawn a distinction between Islamic State and the confined-to-Syria-therefore-acceptable rebels, seeking to portray the former as terrorists and the latter as moderates, regardless of the methods they use and their views on Islam and democracy. The deception is echoed by the US mass media, which often complain that when Russian warplanes target non-Islamic State rebels that they’re striking “moderates,”

as if all rebels apart from Islamic State are moderates, by definition. US Director of Intelligence James Clapper acknowledged that “moderate” means little more than “not Islamic State.” He told the Council on Foreign Relations that “Moderate these days is increasingly becoming anyone who’s not affiliated with” Islamic State. [27]

The rebels are useful to the US government. By putting military pressure on Damascus to exhaust the Syrian army, they facilitate the achievement of the immediate US goal of “forcing a negotiated settlement to the conflict that will see President Assad and some his supporters leave office while preserving the institutions and security structures of the Syrian state,” [28] as Congress’s researchers summarize US strategy. Hence, Islamic State exists both as a useful instrument of US policy, and as a threat to US domination and control of Iraq and the broader Middle East. To Washington, the terrorist organization is a double-edged sword, and is treated accordingly. US airstrikes on Islamic State appear calculated to weaken the terrorist group enough that it doesn’t gain more territory in Iraq, but not so much that pressure is taken off Damascus. A tepid approach to fighting the hyper-sectarian terrorist group fits with US president Barack Obama’s stated goal of degrading and ultimately destroying Islamic State, which appears to mean destroying it only after it has served its purpose of exhausting the Syrian army. In the meantime, the anti-Shiite cut-throats are given enough latitude to maintain pressure on Syrian loyalists.

Congress’s researchers concur with this view. They conclude that “US officials may be concerned that a more aggressive campaign against the Islamic State may take military pressure off the” Syrian government. [29] This means that the US president is moderating efforts to destroy Islamic State to allow a group he decries as “simply a network of killers who are brutalizing local populations” [30] continue their work of brutalizing local populations. If he truly believed Islamic State was a scourge that needed to be destroyed, the US president would work with the Syrian government to expunge it. Instead, he has chosen to wield Islamic State as a weapon to expunge the Syrian government, in the service of building up Israel and fostering free market and free enterprise economies in the Middle East to accommodate US foreign investment and exports on behalf of his Wall Street sponsors. [31]

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27. James Clapper: US Director of Intelligence: <http://www.cfr.org/homeland-security/james-clapper-global-intelligence-challenges/p36195>
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29. Christopher M. Blanchard, Carla E. Humud Mary Beth D. Nikitin, "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response," Congressional Research Service," October 9, 2015.
30. Blanchard and Humud.
31. Virtually every member of the Obama administration, past and present, is a member of the Wall Street-dominated Council on Foreign Relations, or additionally, has spent part of his or her career on Wall Street. Wall Street was a major source of Obama's election campaign funding. The strong

interlock between Wall Street and the executive branch of the US government is not unique to the Obama administration. See my "[Aspiring to Rule the World: US Capital and the Battle for Syria](#)," what's left, December 15, 2015.

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