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To cite this article: Patrick Donovan Higgins (2023) Gunning for Damascus: The US War on the Syrian Arab Republic, *Middle East Critique*, 32:2, 217-241, DOI: [10.1080/19436149.2023.2199487](https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2023.2199487)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2023.2199487>



Published online: 19 Apr 2023.



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Gunning for Damascus: The US War on the Syrian Arab Republic

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ABSTRACT: *Commentators across Anglophone media and academic institutions frequently have minimized the role of US-led imperialism in Syria. This trivialization has been made possible by the covert nature of the war's initial phases. Therefore, this article aims to piece together some of the most conspicuous aspects of the empirical record of the war. It begins with a historical overview of major US attacks against Syria, as well as prevailing attitudes about Syria within the US National Security Establishment (NSE), between the end of the WWII and 2011. The second part aggregates and reviews the existing empirical record on the current war, beginning with the Bush Administration's preparations for operations subsequently launched under the Obama Administration in 2011, then continuing to be waged under the following administrations. The conclusion offers some theoretical remarks on the wider regional context of the US's aims in Syria, highlighting their connections to various developments elsewhere in the region, ranging from similar wars nearby, to recent political losses suffered by the Palestinian national movement.*

KEY WORDS: *Al Qaeda; Anti-Zionism; Colonialism; Covert Action; ISIS; Palestine; Pan Arabism; Syria; US-led imperialism*

Commentators across Anglophone media and academic institutions frequently have minimized the role of US-led imperialism in Syria. They often present it as a secondary and peripheral factor in the destruction of Syrian society that has unfolded over the better part of the past decade. This claim, which in its most extreme variations amounts to a denial of the very existence of an ongoing US war, is made possible by two related problems. First, except for the 9/11-induced 'state of emergency' that paved the way for open invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the US overwhelmingly has relied on covert operations and Special Forces detachments to carry out its wars since the ignominy of its 1975 withdrawal from Vietnam—a tactical change directly related to the impact of the anti-imperialist movements of the 1960s–1980s, including those in the US itself. The very nature of covert and proxy warfare creates difficulties in locating reliable primary sources and clear evidence about war campaigns, especially in their initial phases. Second, general confusion over the precise goals of the

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

US campaign in Syria allows deniers to claim that US-led imperialism has no interest in attacking the state headquartered in Damascus. Adding to this confusion is the common assumption that ‘war’ and ‘regime change’ are interchangeable terms, a conflation that fails to acknowledge that US-led imperialism maintains both maximal and minimal aims in any given covert war.

There remains a pressing need to collect, examine, and theorize about the primary sources available regarding the details of the ongoing US war on Syria. This article is an attempt to piece together some of the most conspicuous aspects of the empirical record of the war. Because the war is still underway, and because so much about it remains to be de-classified, this effort only can be partial. That does not make the task any less essential. This article proceeds in three parts. First, it offers a historical overview of major US attacks against Syria, as well as prevailing attitudes about Syria within the US National Security Establishment (NSE), between the end of the WWII and the onset of the current war in 2011. This summary, far from exhaustive, is intended to highlight the historical continuities and trends across US presidential administrations, a practice necessary for understanding US imperialism as a system, as opposed to an ultimately aimless succession of fundamentally divergent regimes. The second part aggregates and reviews some of the existing empirical record on the current war, beginning with the Bush Administration’s war preparations for operations launched under the Obama Administration in 2011, and continuing since to be waged under the Trump and Biden Administrations. The conclusion of the article offers some theoretical remarks on the wider regional context of the US war.

Establishing Motive: Syria and the US, 1945-2000

After the Second World War, Syria shared with most of the world the challenge of breaking free from colonialism—in this case, French colonialism. Syria similarly shared with the majority of Africa, Asia, and the Americas the experience, in this specific instance through the Sykes-Picot Agreement, of being reduced and enclosed by Balkanization. At the same time, the US emerged as the world’s major power. As a major creditor to France and Britain during the war, the US attempted to restructure the world system in the wake of the deficit-driven withdrawals of French and British colonialisms from Africa and Asia.¹ This task was multidimensional, involving the interrelated realms of trade and military expansion. On matters of trade, the postwar Truman Administration sought to establish an ‘Open Door’ through ‘the elimination of trade and financial barriers, exclusive trading blocs, and restrictive policies of every sort.’² Although the administration portrayed the new trade arrangements as facilitating a neutral freedom of international exchange, they in fact represented an Americanization of the global system, reflecting US capital’s needs as they existed in the late 1940s. The newly created World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) regulated world trade under the common currency of the US dollar; the postwar economic reconstruction of Western Europe provided US exporters with emergent markets; and military coordination with receding British imperialism increasingly allowed

¹ Joyce and Gabriel Kolko (1972) *The Limits of Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1945-1954* (New York: Harper and Row), p. 11.

² Ibid, p. 12.

US corporations preferential access to the key resources of the industrialized world, namely oil.³

As the Soviet Union grew in global popularity, robust labor movements and peasant uprisings that challenged US capital took shape throughout the world. To assert control over resources and trade routes while bypassing nominal democratic norms, the US resorted to covert violence. US imperialism boosted investment into covert action as an extra-legal enforcement and repression mechanism. The US military and intelligence agencies prioritized preventing peasant revolutions in former colonies, often in coordination with the old European colonial powers. Under these general conditions, the US's position toward Syria reflected four main priorities, discussed in detail below, that remained consistent across presidential administrations in the latter half of the 20th century.

The importance of establishing motives vis-a-vis Syria across many US presidential administrations is to make clear that, since the end of WWII, the US has maintained a *project*, in the world generally and specifically in West Asia of which Syria is part. To recognize the existence of such a project is an important step to apprehending US-led imperialism as a *system*.⁴ It should be noted that the White House represents only one institution out of the entire vast infrastructure of the US NSE.⁵ Despite the existence of such a project, meaningful differences between presidential administrations and among (as well as within) the various factions of the NSE do exist.⁶ Scholarship on 'parapolitics,' for instance, detailed how factionalism is endemic to the NSE, whose reach extends to major corporations and the intelligence agencies of other governments.⁷ However, it also affirms

³ Oil has been the primary commodity of Western value drain from, and unequal exchange with, the Arab region for over a century. As Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicutt explains, companies like Aramco and the "Seven Sisters" made vast sums off "tax-deductible profit sharing with royalties," which set off a long struggle for sovereignty over oil resources between Arab nationalists and US oil companies that lasted through the 20th century. See: Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicutt (2021) *The Paranoid Style in American Diplomacy: Oil and Arab Nationalism in Iraq* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press), pp. 220. Although not a major source of oil itself, Syria played an essential role in those struggles as the homeland of several radical Arab republican governments that demanded more equal royalty rates for pipelines the formerly British-owned Iraqi Petroleum Company (IPC) needed to run from Iraq, to shipping ports off the coast of Lebanon. Britain needed cheap Iraqi oil to help pay off its wartime debts. See: Ivan Pearson (2007) 'The Syrian Crisis of 1957, the Anglo-American 'Special Relationship', and the 1958 Landings in Jordan and Lebanon,' *Middle Eastern Studies*, 43 (1), pp. 45–64.

⁴ For the use of the word imperialism, see the introduction in this Special Issue by Matteo Capasso and Ali Kadri. My own article here is meant to serve as a small contribution toward understanding the role brutal covert wars such as in Syria play in maintaining these unequal global relations of accumulation and value-transfer.

⁵ Although the United States has maintained some form of war state since its inception, the basic foundations of the NSE in its contemporary form date back to the National Security Act of 1947, which established the National Security Council (NSC), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the Department of Defense.

⁶ For example, while the Kennedy White House and the CIA shared basic suppositions about core issues like the US's place in the world, the desirability of capitalism, and the strategic need to defeat Communism, they notoriously fell into deep mutual hostility regarding the CIA's preferred tactics to achieve those goals as displayed in the 1961 failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba.

⁷ Peter Dale Scott defines the study of "parapolitics," which he developed specifically with the CIA in mind, as investigating the "system or practice of politics in which accountability is consciously diminished." He employs the term "deep politics" to capture a related phenomenon more psychoanalytic in nature, which encompasses more layers of society than just the "deep state," referring to "all those political practices and arrangements, deliberate or not, which usually are repressed rather than acknowledged." See Peter Dale Scott (1993) *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press), pp. 6–7. Such an occurrence may explain the apparent schizophrenia in the mainstream press itself, which simultaneously reports on the CIA's covert war in Syria one moment and in another mourns the US's "inaction" in Syria, as CNN, Time Magazine, and The Washington Post have done.

that the very nature and scale of US clandestinity nurtures factionalism, which then contributes to shaping specific policies and events.

This aspect clarifies why and when certain paths of attack are pursued against others. In the case of Syria, the NSE shared broad consensus on the so-called ‘strategic threat’ the post-independence Syrian Republics posed to the US-led order in West Asia, while the tactics used against them have diverged according to the global and US power arrangements of a given moment. In order to ascertain the broader strategic aspects of the current US war in and on Syria, it is necessary to explore in more detail the four principal sources of US NSE animosity toward the Syrian government, as they developed in the 20th century.

1. *Syria’s historic relationship with Russia:* Between 1945 and 1991, US intelligence agents repeatedly expressed frustration at the kinds of local political forces and organizations made possible by the USSR’s diplomatic and military support for Syria and, by the same token, Syria’s relative freedom of action from US influence and dependency. Beginning at least in 1949, the newly independent Syrian Republic had been targeted by US-led covert operations—before even better-known examples of CIA malfeasance in Iran, Guatemala, and Indonesia.⁸ The examples in Syria are plentiful. In 1949, the CIA participated in a coup replacing the elected president Shukri Quwatli with Husni Za’im. In 1951, the CIA at the very least encouraged Adib Shishakli’s coup, which resulted in the dissolution of Syrian parliament and the installation of a military state. In 1956, it planned a coup that went so far as to call on the Turkish military to stage border incidents, a plot, arranged under the name Operation Straggle, that wound up being sidelined by the Suez Crisis. A year later in 1957, in one of the first attempted applications of the ‘Eisenhower Doctrine,’ which held that the US had the right to intervene in West Asian countries threatened by ‘international communism,’ the CIA embarked on Operation Wappen. The Syrian security services discovered this project, and roundly arrested the anticommunist right-wing military officers the CIA had tapped to do its bidding. At the top of the list of US concerns throughout each operation was the growing popularity of the Syrian Communist Party, which as early as the 1940s prompted Secretary of State George Marshall to warn against the encroaching specter of ‘Syrian-USSR rapprochement.’⁹

The Syrian government’s relationship with the USSR later enabled it to open up revolutionary fronts spilling beyond its borders. In 1972, during a high mark of the Palestinian Revolution, the CIA lamented ‘the spirit of militancy’ that animated ‘forceful Syrian responses’ to ongoing Israeli attempts, through ‘pre-emptive strikes,’ to destroy the ‘fedayeen bases’ then residing in Syria.¹⁰ The USSR had ‘augmented’ Syrian capabilities with ‘new defensive hardware... by both sea and air deliveries,’ with Syria having ‘chastised some of its Arab brother states for failing to join in its current struggle with Israel,’ expressing a ‘new aura of toughness... served by Moscow’s recent demonstration of close support for

⁸ Douglass Little (1990) *Cold War and Covert Action: The United States and Syria, 1945-1958*, *Middle East Journal*, 44 (1), p. 51–52.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁰ Central Intelligence Bulletin (1972). Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00975A023300090002-2.pdf>, accessed November 19, 2021.

Damascus.¹¹ According to US analysts from the same period, after the 1973 October War, where the Syrian armed forces temporarily made significant advances against the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) in the occupied Golan Heights region, the USSR opted to ‘focus its military aid diplomacy on Syria,’ with Soviet arms deliveries to Syria constituting ‘the most sent to any of Moscow’s Third World clients’ by 1974.¹² Just as the Soviet Union helped to provide a development path outside of the US orbit, it also allowed Syria, albeit still within extreme limitations, to resist political normalization with the US-supported Zionist project in bordering Palestine.

2. *Syria’s economic independence*: The 1963 coup d’état brought the Syrian branch of the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party to power. Owing to the Ba’ath Party’s social base in the peasantry, the government accelerated existing programs for land reform—the redistribution of land holdings, taken from long standing barons and then given to small farmers.¹³ The process of reform involved significant popular participation, wherein street mobilizations demanded both support for the Palestinian people against Zionism and the redistribution of land wealth. In the analysis of the Communists and Ba’athists in the 1960s, the Zionist movement posed a threat to the whole region, and it shared class interests with the bourgeoisie of Arab society. The bubbling radicalism of Syria’s revolutionary movements culminated in another coup in 1966, which installed Major General Salah Jadid as head of state, who entertained Marxist ideas. So, the coup increased Syria’s ties to the Soviet Union and promoted a model of development premised on popular participation, including a strategic shift towards People’s War to confront Israel. During this period, US intelligence observers shuddered at Syria’s transformation into a revolutionary base, labeling it a ‘center of instability,’ where the Syrian leadership was now ‘largely of peasant stock,’ expressing a preference for ‘irresponsible socialist policies’ that pushed ‘many professional people and merchants to remove themselves or their assets to more stable environments outside the country.’¹⁴ With these supposedly ‘irresponsible’ delinquents in power, progressive movements won tangible victories, such as nationalizing territory from the Iraqi Petroleum Company after it refused the Jadid government’s demand to double royalty payments for its pipelines running through Syria.
3. *Syria’s role in Third World solidarity and material support for national liberation movements*: When US intelligence analysts decried the Syrian Arab Republic for its ‘progressive ties’ in the late 1960s, they specified several national liberation movements and Arab republican governments engaged in struggle against US, British, and/or French imperialism, each having received a friendly reception in Syria. Regionally, these ties included Nasserist Egypt and post-revolution Algeria,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Interagency Intelligence Memorandum (1975) “Arms Deliveries to Syria,” available online at: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP86T00608R000600060021-8.pdf>, accessed November 19, 2021. This description especially must be understood with the ideological biases of intelligence agents in mind, as Syria’s military strengths only existed relative to the rest of the Soviet-supported sphere. Compared to the US-Israeli alliance, Syria was poor and technologically underdeveloped.

¹³ For an overview of the achievements and failures of the agrarian reforms, see Ziad Keilany (1980) Land Reform in Syria, *Middle Eastern Studies* 16 (3), pp. 209–224.

¹⁴ Directorate of Intelligence (1967) Weekly Summary Special Report: Syria: A Center of Instability, March 24. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79-00927A005700050003-4.pdf>, accessed November 19, 2021.

both of which, despite their many extreme tactical disagreements with each other and the SAR, were united by a common opposition to ‘conservative Arab states—especially Jordan and Saudi Arabia—[potentially forming] a moderate bloc receptive to Western influence.’¹⁵ Furthermore, the Jadid government, according to the US, had welcomed into Damascus leaders from the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen (FLOSY). In 1970, the so-called ‘Corrective Movement,’ the coup and purge that brought Hafez al-Assad to power, scaled back Syria’s revolutionary commitments, particularly pertaining to the Palestinian Revolution and land collectivization. Nonetheless, Assad still proceeded to expand diplomatic links with national liberation movements early in his tenure. An important example was the 10th Executive Meeting of the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO), hosted in Damascus in June of 1971. The event enabled Asian and African governments to convene under one roof, coordinating an agenda for the mobilization of resources. The conference prioritized three ongoing struggles: ‘a) The struggle of Indo-Chinese peoples against the continued escalation of the US imperialist war of aggression;’ ‘b) The struggle of Arab peoples against the Israeli-American imperialist aggression;’ and ‘c) The struggle for African peoples for liberation from colonialism and racial discrimination... particularly in the Portuguese colonies and southern Africa.’¹⁶ This kind of initiative sprung from Syria’s own experience of successive revolutions, including national revolutions against French rule and continuing into social revolutions after independence.

4. *Pan Arabism and Anti-Zionism*: In the immediate wake of Syria’s independence from France, declared in April of 1946, the Syrian Republic under President Shukri al-Quwatli prioritized marshalling state resources to give material, diplomatic, and propaganda support to Arab nations still enduring direct colonialism, namely Algeria and Palestine.¹⁷ The latter policy frustrated the most powerful factions of the US NSC’s postwar plans for the Levant, for, although a few scattered State Department officials were critical of total alignment with the Zionist movement, the Truman White House and the CIA ultimately resolved to support the establishment of Israel.¹⁸ After the announcement of the United Nations partition plan in November of 1947, the Syrian Republic mobilized to resist the Zionist ethnic cleansing campaigns being carried out across Palestine by providing a headquarters to the volunteer Arab Liberation Army (ALA) led by Fawzi al-Quwaqji. In response, one State Department observer declared that the ‘Syrian Govt could easily be charged with complicity in threatening international peace and security with regard to Palestine,’ and that, by ‘providing facilities for this press junket to Qawukji’s headquarters,’ the Syrian Defense Minister was

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization (1971), The 10th Executive Committee Session of AAPSO, Damascus.

¹⁷ For more information on the Syrian Republic’s support for the Algerian national liberation struggle, see: Patrick Higgins (2020), *The French History Podcast*, Syria and the French Empire from WWI to Present. Available at: <https://www.thefrenchhistorypodcast.com/podcast/849/>, accessed November 22, 2021.

¹⁸ For a valuable overview of the nature of debates over Israel and the Zionist movement in the late 1940s, see: Irene Gendzier (2016), *Dying to Forget: Oil, Power, Palestine, and the Foundations of US Policy in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press).

‘merely preparing grave difficulties for his own govt.’¹⁹ Twenty one days before the March 1949 coup that deposed Quwatli (until he was later re-elected as president in 1955) was carried out, US intelligence officials complained bitterly about Syria’s ‘[refusal] to enter armistice negotiations’ and its ‘disrupting influence on the negotiations between Israel and Lebanon,’ concluding that ‘all available international influence should be brought to bear to induce Syria to enter negotiations.’²⁰

In the ensuing decades, US financial, political, and military commitment to Israel escalated considerably in tandem with the formation of a strong Palestinian movement. While Syrian state involvement in the Palestinian liberation struggle continues to be contentious within the movement itself, it nonetheless drew consistent ire from the US NSE. When in the mid-1960s, the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, known better as Fateh, began to launch commando operations into occupied Palestine as the start of an extended guerrilla campaign, Syria inspired rage both in the NSE and the world Zionist movement for providing training grounds to the fedayin.²¹ As relations later deteriorated between the Syrian Arab Republic and Fateh, the former moved intermittently to support a host of other Palestinian revolutionary organizations, including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), and Sa’iqa, the Syrian Ba’ath Party’s own faction in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). During the 1980s, US intelligence focused closely on the Syrian Arab Republic’s anti-systemic relationships with other regional states, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya.²²

Another major period of tension between the US and Syria developed out of the war in Lebanon from 1975 to 1990. US enmity toward Syria over the Lebanon war needs to be understood on a long-term basis, as the Syrian Arab Army initially entered Lebanon in 1976 to help crush the PLO, much to the glee of the Israeli military and US leadership, especially Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.²³ This maneuver severely wounded the Syrian military’s reputation among Palestinians in the refugee camps, who raged at the intervention as an act of grave treachery committed in a moment of dire need.²⁴ The contrasting warmth the US and Israeli establishments felt for Syria was short-lived. While Hafez al-Assad worried about the possibility of a

¹⁹ Foreign Relations of the United States (1948), Volume V, Part 2, eds. Herbert A. Fine and Paul Claussen (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1976), Document 88. Available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v05p2/d88>, accessed November 22, 2021.

²⁰ Foreign Relations of the United States (1949), Volume VI, The Near East, South Asia, and Africa, eds. Herbert A. Fine, William Z. Slany, Lee H. Burke, Frederick Aandahl, David H. Stauffer, and Frederic A. Greenhut (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1977), Document 517. Available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1949v06/d517>, accessed November 22, 2021.

²¹ Directorate of Intelligence (1967) Weekly Summary Special Report: Syria: A Center of Instability, March 24. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79-00927A005700050003-4.pdf>, accessed November 19, 2021.

²² Directorate of Intelligence (1987) Syria After Amman: The Threat to Israel, 4 December. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90T00114R000700760001-8.pdf>, accessed November 22, 2021.

²³ For a detailed overview of Kissinger’s overtures and thinking regarding the Syrian entry into Lebanon, as well as his public appraisal of his actions in his memoir *Years of Renewal*, see: David M. Wight (2013) Kissinger’s Levantine Dilemma: The Ford Administration and the Syrian Occupation of Lebanon, *Diplomatic History*, 37 (1), pp. 144–177.

²⁴ Roy Battersby’s 1977 documentary film *The Palestinian* features riveting first-hand accounts from Palestinians from the besieged Tel al-Zaatar refugee camp in Lebanon.

successful Palestinian Revolution on his border existing outside of his control, he also refused any long-term detente with the US and Israel in Lebanon. This very issue—the prospect of settlement and negotiation between PLO leadership and Israel—became a key source of friction between Assad and the Fateh leadership in Lebanon. Assad’s decision to support Fateh al Intifada, a splinter group led by Said al-Muragha, against Yassir Arafat, provoked US officials, who pointed out that Syria was attempting to ‘scuttle’ negotiations between the PLO and Israel; that ‘there is no doubt that Syria is the only major frontline state dedicated to continuing strategic confrontation with Israel’; and that Syria constituted ‘by far Israel’s greatest problem.’²⁵

While this overview is selective and far from exhaustive, exclusive reliance on US sources cannot serve as any kind of basis for understanding revolutions on their own terms. The US sources’ very language is steeped in ideology, reflecting a particular class position and worldview, and their assertions sometimes are spotted with errors borne by obsession. Nowhere is that more apparent than in US sources’ insistence on referring to Palestinian resistance groups as ‘terrorists’ for claiming their right, recognized under international law, to take up arms against a colonial occupation.²⁶ Nonetheless, they provide a window into the NSE’s attitudes toward Syria, showing consistent patterns and a basic set of consensus beliefs. Also, US personnel’s objections to Syrian policies do not automatically make them progressive or commendable in the context of the revolutions in which they were undertaken. References to ‘Syrian forces,’ ‘Syrian leadership,’ the ‘Syrian government,’ et al., are after all references to the behavior of a state. States have interests. As Amiri Baraka used to say: ‘Countries [states] want independence; nations want liberation; and the people want revolution.’²⁷ The Syrian state maintains an interest against Zionism because its own territory in the Golan Heights has been occupied by Israel since 1967. Its support for Palestinian liberation therefore always has been conditional. However, the NSE’s long-term attitudes do help, at the very least, to illuminate that it is in the overlap between Syrian state interests and Palestinian liberation that US-led imperialism historically has opposed the former. In other words, US-led imperialism, despite its spokespersons’ public emphasis on ‘human rights,’ has not targeted the Syrian state for occasions it has infringed on human freedom, but rather for the times it has aided it.

Syria under the Global War on Terror: 2001-2010

It was during the second Bush Administration that the NSE’s anti-Syrian efforts moved from scattershot operations to a more concerted war plan—a fact that

²⁵ See: Central Intelligence Agency (1982) Arafat Reportedly Accepts Hussein’s Proposal, 14 October. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84B00049R001604070004-5.pdf>, accessed December 8, 2021; Central Intelligence Agency (1985) Iran, Libya, Syria: Prospects for Radical Cooperation, April. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP87T00573R000500630003-7.pdf>, accessed December 8, 2021; and Central Intelligence Agency (1983) Bringing Real Muscle to Bear Against Syria. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP88B00443R001404090133-0.pdf>, accessed December 8, 2021.

²⁶ Louis Allday (2022) Palestinians’ inalienable right to resist, *Ebb Magazine*. Available at: <https://www.ebb-magazine.com/essays/the-palestinians-inalienable-right-to-resist>, accessed October 31, 2022.

²⁷ Amiri Baraka (1979) “Countries Want Independence, Nations Want Liberation, and the People, the People Want Revolution! A Poem for the Unity of the RCL (M-L-M) and LRS (M-L),” <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-5/baraka-poem.pdf>. This slogan had been used and repeated in the pamphlets of revolutionary anti-imperialist, mostly Marxist-Leninist, US-based organizations in the 1970s.

undermines most official summaries of the current war. Since 2011, major media have pinpointed the origins of the armed attacks against the Syrian state and the ensuing war as beginning with protestors' turn to self-defense against Ba'athist security forces. In the mainstream media, overall impressions were cast: The opposition took up arms purely out of self-defense against a state crackdown; the emergence of armed rebel groups that ensued constituted the start of a civil war between Syrians; and the development of reactionary sectarian militias occurred as the result of foreign intervention several years after the war began.

This outline presents three main limitations. First, it suggests that the sectarian aims of armed opposition groups emerge from nowhere. If the armed movement so quickly and easily morphed from revolutionary to murderously sectarian, it would appear to suggest that the exclusivist ideology of the majority of the so-called 'rebel groups'—violently opposed to the existence of minority religious sects—was shaped and provoked solely by the violence of the Ba'athist state. Such a conclusion is racist and cynical, suggesting that an oppressed Sunni's natural response to state oppression is to target, kill, and discriminate against 'Alawis and Christians. Second, as far as histories go, this media paradigm omits the decades-long history of US financial and military support for al Qaeda and similar forces before the outbreak of the war in Syria. Depending on where one chooses to begin, that history would date back further to the US's proxy war against the late Soviet Union in Afghanistan; the US's long-standing relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the regional wellspring of Wahhabi ideology; and even back to Syria itself, where decades before 2011 the Muslim Brotherhood, financed by upper class reactionaries, exiled to places like Saudi Arabia over their discontentment with Ba'athist land collectivization and secularization efforts, and launched armed insurgency campaigns against the ruling Ba'ath Party in the 1960s and 1970s.²⁸ Third, such media summaries omit the known history of US war preparations against Syria made by the Bush Administration, later to be continued under Obama.

Initially, the Bush Administration sought to take advantage of vacancies left by the Soviet Union to entreat the SAR to make concessions willingly. After the overthrow of Soviet power in Russia and Eastern Europe in 1991, Hafez al-Assad effectively turned away from the 'Arab socialism' of the Ba'ath Party platform and oversaw significant capitalist reforms. With Syria's major suppliers and trading blocs diminished, the elder Assad sought to make up for a plummeting currency and depleted foreign exchange reserves with an injection of US-led capital and a liberalization of financial markets. A 'new bourgeoisie,' beneficiaries of Western capital export, formed within the major cities, while public investment into the countryside contracted dramatically.²⁹ After Hafez died in 2000, his son Bashar ascended to leadership and immediately faced contradictory pressures. While the new bourgeoisie agitated for increased

²⁸ For histories covering US covert operations in Afghanistan, see: Peter Dale Scott (2007) *The Road to 9/11: Wealth, Empire, and the Future of America* (Berkeley: University of California Press); or for a briefer article, Andrew Cockburn (2016) A Special Relationship, In: *Harper's*. Available at: <https://harpers.org/archive/2016/01/a-special-relationship/>, accessed November 23, 2021. For some background on the history of Muslim Brotherhood-led insurgencies in Syria, see: Patrick Higgins (2015) The War on Syria, *Jacobin*. Available at: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/syria-civil-war-nato-military-intervention/>, accessed December 13, 2021.

²⁹ There are multiple accounts of these significant transformations toward free market relations to be found in: Linda Matar and Ali Kadri (eds., 2018) *Syria: From National Independence to Proxy War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

detente with the United States, the popular classes—urban workers, small farmers, unemployed, and radical intellectuals—held steadily to principles of anti-Zionism, anti-colonialism, and anti-imperialism. Regional politics added another source of pressure. As the younger Assad's own liberalization (of the political system as well as markets) gained momentum, he also embraced the Republic of Iraq, with which the Syrian Arab Republic long had been at odds in an inter-Ba'athist rivalry dating as far back as the 1966 coup in Syria. Reconciliation between the two countries in 2000 helped Iraq to avoid US sanctions, reopened an oil pipeline between the two states, and allowed Syria to re-supply its cash-strapped treasury by purchasing Iraqi oil at subsidized prices.³⁰ Whereas previously the US occasionally could exploit Syria's dispute with Iraq to isolate the latter, as was the case during the 1991 attack on Iraq, the SAR now was reversing course toward a path of cooperation with its neighbor.

After September 11, 2001, following the US's subsequent declaration of a State of Emergency, the implementation of the PATRIOT Act, and the launch of the Global War on Terror—a program intended, among other things, to replace 'communism' with 'terrorism' as a superstructural means of reshaping or weakening relatively de-linked holdout states formerly in the Soviet orbit—US-Syrian relations continued to deteriorate. That year, popular rage ignited in Syria against Israel over the outbreak of the Second Intifada, prompting the Syrian government to adopt several measures in support of the Palestinian uprising. Calling for Arabs to support the Intifada, the SAR granted permission to Palestinian resistance factions like Hamas and Islamic Jihad to open offices in Damascus, a policy that led to Israeli reprisal bombings, first of Syrian positions in Lebanon and then, in 2003, of a Palestinian training camp near Damascus.³¹ As the United States prepared to launch its invasion of Iraq in March of 2003, Assad took to the pages of *Al-Safir* to air his assessment of the US and its partners: 'No doubt the US is a super-power capable of conquering a relatively small country, but... the US and Britain are incapable of controlling all of Iraq.'³² He allegedly supplemented these words with concrete actions by allowing volunteer fighters over the border into Iraq to combat the US occupation. The US Congress responded with the 2003 Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSRA), the implementation of hardline sanctions to ensure, among other things, that anti-Zionist militias be expelled from Syrian territory and divested of Syrian succor in all possible forms.³³ US displeasure continued to increase after the SAR, working with the IRI, armed Hezbollah with a missile arsenal capable of striking Israeli forces deep into occupied Palestine, as displayed in the June 2006 War. In 2007, the Bush Administration gave the greenlight to Operation Outside the Box; that is, Israel's bombing of a Syrian nuclear site just outside of Deir ez-Zor. In 2008, the US overtly violated Syrian sovereignty with an alleged 'anti-terrorism' operation in the Abu Kamal raid, where Special Operations forces, consisting of four Black Hawk helicopters and around two dozen soldiers, killed eight people.

³⁰ Raymond Hinnebusch (2010) Syria under Bashar: Between Economic Reform and Nationalist Realpolitik, in Hinnebusch (ed.) *Syrian Foreign Policy and the United States: From Bush to Obama* (Fife, Scotland: University of St. Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies), p. 7.

³¹ Ibid, p. 11.

³² Ibid, p. 14.

³³ 108th Congress Public Law 175 (2003) Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003. Available at: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-108publ175/html/PLAW-108publ175.htm>, accessed November 24, 2021.

In March, 2009, a report from *Al-Akhbar* revealed the terms by which the Bush Administration would help to facilitate Israeli-Syrian negotiations, remove Syria from its list of terrorism-sponsoring nations, and lift sanctions from it. The demands were consistent with past US directives: the SAR would have to sever its ties with the Iran, Hezbollah, and all Palestinian resistance factions.³⁴ Assad's consistent refusal to agree to these terms, coupled with heavy spiraling US losses in Iraq that officials blamed on the Syria-Iran front, led the NSE to plan a new covert war on the country. The basic contours first were made public in 2007, in Seymour Hersh's 'The Redirection.'³⁵ Since its publication, a good deal of the article's forecasts have materialized. The basic premise entailed the collaboration of US, Saudi, and Israeli governments to target the SAR, Iran, and Hezbollah. The US would elide Congressional oversight and launch a new series of 'clandestine operations' by 'leaving the execution or the funding to the Saudis,' who would rely on their pre-existing ties to 'the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis' to 'provide funds and logistical aid to weaken the government of President Bashir [sic] Assad, of Syria.'³⁶ Then serving deputy national-security advisor Elliott Abrams, who was convicted for lying about the Iran-Contra scandal, took a leading role on the project, serving as a key personnel link between the US's covert wars in Central America in the 1980s and its covert war on Syria in the 2010s.

The US War on Syria: 2011-Present

For the better part of the last decade, the US war on Syria has been waged covertly. The initial secrecy of the campaign has helped the Anglophone press and academia to minimize the size and impact of the US dimension of the war. It is important therefore to make a few remarks about the role of covert and proxy warfare in US-led imperialism. Since the war on Vietnam and the US's inglorious withdrawal from that country, US personnel have been forced increasingly to pursue covert wars, many of them through proxy rather than direct invasion. The reason for this rearrangement can be summed up with reference to the so-called 'Vietnam Syndrome.' The Brookings Institution, among the National Security Council's primary collaborative think-tanks, defined this supposed affliction as 'the belief, born of brutal experience during the Vietnam War, that never again will the United States gradually tiptoe into questionable wars without a clear cut objective, overwhelming military force, an endgame strategy and, most important, the support of Congress and the American people.'³⁷ Translating this bit from Beltway bureaucratic lexicon, the 'Vietnam Syndrome' describes the fear that overt commitment to murderous and environmentally calamitous wars sparks resistance of such intensity that it eventually creates a social and political crisis among the US domestic population itself.³⁸ Vietnam proved that major invasions threaten to

³⁴ Hinnebusch, Syria under Bashar, p. 22.

³⁵ Seymour Hersh (2007) The Redirection, *The New Yorker*. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/03/05/the-redirection>, accessed December 14, 2021.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Marvin Kalb (2013) It's Called the Vietnam Syndrome, and It's Back, *The Brookings Institution*. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2013/01/22/its-called-the-vietnam-syndrome-and-its-back/>, accessed November 27, 2021.

³⁸ Marlon Ettinger (2021) "Mutiny in Vietnam: Richard Boyle's *Flower of the Dragon: The Breakdown of the US Army in Vietnam*," *Liberated Texts*. Available at: <https://liberatedtexts.com/reviews/mutiny-in-vietnam-richard-boyles-flower-of-the-dragon/>, accessed January 11, 2023.

call into question the legitimacy of the entire system that plans and executes wars of aggression.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the antiwar movement pressured the US Congress into holding hearings and passing a series of laws aimed at regulating US war machinations, such as the Church and Pike Committees, the Arms Export Control Act of 1976, and the Boland Amendment of 1984. US war makers thus faced a double-bind problem: They could manage wars directly and have to confront the political fallout; or they could relinquish direct control by outsourcing war management to proxies. These constraints beguiled and embittered some factions in the NSE. The Iran-Contra Affair, for instance, was a sustained effort by military planners to get around the Boland Amendment. Notably, Oliver North, the official face of that scandal, got his military start leading secret marine units into North Vietnam. After that experience, he was so notoriously ‘pumped up’ that he returned to Vietnam to defend a former marine accused of murdering 16 Vietnamese men and children.³⁹ He wore his resentment against the antiwar movement on his sleeve, once saying: ‘We didn’t lose the war in Vietnam... We lost the war right here [in the United States].’⁴⁰ North’s Iran-Contra cohort, George H.W. Bush, used his position in the White House as Vice President, while drawing on his contacts from his time as head of the CIA, to direct illegal weapons and funding networks during the US wars in Central America.⁴¹ It is therefore appropriate that, after leading a blitzkrieg attack on Iraq as president in March of 1991, Bush exclaimed victoriously, ‘It’s a proud day for America. And, by God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.’⁴²

The covert methods that came to dominate US war planning actually first were implemented in Vietnam. The US Special Forces slogan ‘Winning Hearts and Minds’ (WHAM), argues H. Bruce Franklin, wielded both a stick and a carrot.⁴³ The stick was the Phoenix Program, a torture and assassination infrastructure first developed against ‘Communist sympathizers’ in South Vietnam, an attempt to destroy National Liberation Front (NLF) leadership by targeting and terrorizing their support base. Covert operations embodied the method by which the US initially wanted to prosecute the war for the recolonization of Vietnam. One top secret 1963 plan, National Security Action Memorandum 273, underlined the importance of ‘plausibility of denial,’ and, relative to Vietnam, the US has tried to hold true to that tenet in Syria.⁴⁴ The post-Vietnam exceptions to this trend, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, notably occurred in the midst of a 9/11-induced ‘State of Emergency,’ after which, by 2007

³⁹ Art Harris (1986) The Abiding Riddle of Oliver North, *Washington Post*. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1986/12/23/the-abiding-riddle-of-oliver-north/000cbfb3-4406-4453-abee-ccbfb644d0be/>, accessed December 13, 2021.

⁴⁰ Sidney Blumenthal (1987) North the Charge of the Light Brigade, *Washington Post*. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1987/08/05/north-the-charge-of-the-right-brigade/5bda80c-1667-4095-9337-d379c098299d/>, accessed December 13, 2021.

⁴¹ Howard Kohn and Vicki Monks (1988) The Dirty Secrets of George Bush, *Rolling Stone*. Available at: <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/the-dirty-secrets-of-george-bush-71927/>, accessed November 29, 2021.

⁴² Voices and Visions (1991) George H.W. Bush Proclaims a Cure for the Vietnam Syndrome. Available at: <http://vandvreader.org/george-h-w-bush-proclaims-a-cure-for-the-vietnam-syndrome-01-march-1991/>, accessed November 29, 2021.

⁴³ H. Bruce Franklin (2000), *Vietnam & Other American Fantasies* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press), pp. 160–161.

⁴⁴ The White House (1963) National Security Action Memorandum 273. Available at: <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nsam-lbj/nsam-273.htm>, accessed December 13, 2021.

when war plans for Syria were drawn up, direct wars once again were made deeply unpopular by the carnage in Iraq.

Some journalists, like *The Guardian's* onetime Middle East Editor Brian Whitaker, choose to focus on the specific phrase 'regime change' to downplay the war machinations taken against the Syrian state.⁴⁵ The objectives of war, however, are contingent on many factors, including how a given war is going. The Obama Administration ultimately pulled away in 2013 from an Iraq-style 'regime change war,' according to Obama aide Ben Rhodes' memoirs, on account of heated factional disputes, in which an allegedly legacy-minded Obama fretted about being associated with the discredited and despised likes of Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld.⁴⁶ One of the advantages of proxy wars for military planners, however, is that minimal aims, if not maximal ones, easily can be accomplished. As Tom Stevenson notes in his review of *Proxy Wars: The Least Bad Option*, there are four types of proxy wars: 'in it to win it' wars, which intend to supply a proxy to full military victory; 'holding actions,' which prolong civil wars to 'maintain the status quo'; 'meddling,' or influencing the outcome of a war, perhaps by dashing the plans of rivals; and finally, 'feeding the chaos,' prolonging the violence indefinitely as an objective in itself.⁴⁷

Covert operations to foment political unrest in Syria appear to have preceded gun-running. On this front, Obama's State Department took a leading role, emphasizing internally the importance of funding political opposition and protests, while spreading provocative propaganda to instigate political instability. Potential sectarian fault lines were of especial fascination. State Department official William Roebuck discussed the need to 'play on Sunni fears of Iranian influence' by having 'local Egyptian and Saudi missions ... coordinate' their media to target Sunni Syrians.⁴⁸ The State Department also moved funds to a series of opposition figures and organizations, and even set up its own house umbrella dedicated to the matter.⁴⁹

2011-2013: Covert Operations Supporting 'Syrian Rebels'

Some eyewitness reports testify that signs of armed operations in Syria were detectable from the very beginning of the uprising. The more prominent among such testimonies came from V.P. Haran, who was the Indian Ambassador to Syria from 2009 to 2011.⁵⁰ The details of his testimony bears strong resemblance to incidents described by Abdel Hamid Tawfiq, a

⁴⁵ Brian Whitaker (2018) Syria: Why tales of a western 'regime change plot' don't make sense, *Medium*. Available at: <https://brian-whit.medium.com/syria-why-theses-of-a-western-regime-change-plot-don-t-make-sense-1d514747929c>, accessed December 14, 2021.

⁴⁶ Ben Rhodes (2018) *The World as it Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House* (New York: Random House), pp. 197–200.

⁴⁷ Tom Stevenson (2020) In the Grey Zone, *London Review of Books*, 42(20). Available at: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n20/tom-stevenson/in-the-grey-zone>, accessed December 13, 2021.

⁴⁸ Robert Reuel Naiman (2015) WikiLeaks Reveals How the US Aggressively Pursued Regime Change in Syria, Igniting a Bloodbath, *Truthout*. Available at: <https://truthout.org/articles/wikileaks-reveals-how-the-us-aggressively-pursued-regime-change-in-syria-igniting-a-bloodbath/>, Accessed November 29, 2021.

⁴⁹ Recipients included: the Democracy Council of California; the US-Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI); Civil Society Strengthening Initiative (CSSI); propaganda outreach projects like Barada TV; and various individuals, such as Bassam Ishak, who headed the Syrian Human Rights Organization and currently the Syrian Democratic Council.

⁵⁰ Alia Allana (2016) Gulf countries played a role in the Syrian uprising, *Fountain Ink*. Available at: <https://fountainink.in/qna/039gulf-countries-played-a-role-in-the-syrian-uprising039>, accessed December 13, 2021.

longtime *Al Jazeera* correspondent based in Syria, of unidentified masked assailants opening fire on demonstrators. William Van Wagenen of *The Libertarian Institute* has done perhaps the most important investigative work establishing that armed operatives were active in Syria from the beginning, as it were.⁵¹ He uses a methodology long proven crucial in the study of deep politics, which emphasizes that the US and its partners tend to recycle personnel from one arena of covert action to another. By following these personnel through the Arab region and its environs, Van Wagenen sheds light on *how* the US's wars in the region materially are connected. He follows operatives moving into Syria as early as 2011 from several other nearby war zones and battle sites, namely: the 2007 Nahr el-Bared conflict in Lebanon; the US-run Camp Bucca prison in occupied Iraq; the 1990s US-UK joint military ventures in Bosnia and Kosovo; and, more recently, the 2011 NATO campaign in Libya. Combining those research trails with mainstream media reports that Ahrar al-Sham brigades were forming and mobilizing 'well before March 2011,' Van Wagenen's survey conclusively demolishes the idea that sectarian armed insurgents only began to launch attacks in belated response to violent crackdowns on protests.

What was belated, rather, was the mainstream media's coverage of covert action in Syria, although even there the record of clandestine warfare is very clear. Reports that the CIA was training and equipping so-called 'rebels' to attack the Syrian government surfaced in the mainstream US press at least as early as 2012. In June of 2012, *The New York Times* reported that 'a small number of CIA officers are operating secretly in southern Turkey, helping allies decide which Syrian opposition fighters across the border will receive arms to fight the Syrian government...'⁵² In March of 2013, the same newspaper published a story claiming that, 'With help from the C.I.A., Arab governments and Turkey have sharply increased their military aid to Syria's opposition fighters in recent months, expanding a secret airlift of arms and equipment for the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad, according to air traffic data, interviews with officials in several countries and the accounts of rebel commanders.'⁵³

As the ostensible destination group for these weapons was called the 'Free Syrian Army,' a possible point of contention arises as to whether the CIA was aware that they were steering arms to sectarian militias, such as Jabhat al-Nusra or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Did US officials simply believe that they were arming 'pro-democracy' groups? This is a question that depends again on amnesia about the US's long history with al Qaeda and kindred groupings, but even the mainstream press record does not allow for such an alibi. In August of 2012, in an article titled 'Two Cheers for Syrian Islamists,'" Gary Gambill of *Foreign Policy* argued that the 'rebels' ought to be armed precisely *because* of their sectarian predilections. On this point,

⁵¹ William Van Wagenen (2021) Salafis Throwing Bombs: How American and British Planners Partnered With Al-Qaeda Affiliated Groups At the Start of the Syrian Civil War, *The Libertarian Institute*. Available at: <https://libertarianinstitute.org/articles/salafis-throwing-bombs-how-american-and-british-planners-partnered-with-al-qaeda-affiliated-groups-at-the-start-of-the-syrian-civil-war/>, accessed May 6, 2022.

⁵² Eric Schmitt (2012) C.I.A. Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition, *The New York Times*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/21/world/middleeast/cia-said-to-aid-in-steering-arms-to-syrian-rebels.html>, accessed November 27, 2021.

⁵³ C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt (2013) Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From C.I.A., *The New York Times*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html>, accessed November 27, 2021.

Gambill found himself in agreement with Bush Administration thinking as portrayed in Hersh's 'The Redirection': 'The Sunni Islamist surge may also be essential to inflicting a full-blown strategic defeat on Iran. Once the regime is toppled, Assad and his minions will likely retreat to northwestern Syria, where non-Sunnis are (barely) a majority.'⁵⁴ Gambill thus opined in favor of both sectarian warfare and the dismantling of the Syrian state. A 2012 Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) memorandum obtained by Judicial Watch confirmed inside US knowledge, stating outright that 'internally, events are taking a clear sectarian direction' as a result of 'the Salafist [sic], the Muslim Brotherhood, and AQI [al Qaeda in Iraq] [being] the major forces driving the insurgency.'⁵⁵ The DIA shared Gambill's preferred policy and even foresaw the rise of ISIS, saying, 'If the situation unravels, there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist principality in Eastern Syria ... and this is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want, in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of the Shia expansion (Iraq and Iran).' Once again, an explicit call for sectarian warfare and the destruction of the Syrian state.

The CIA program, officially known now as Operation Timber Sycamore, was, according to *The New York Times*, 'one of the costliest covert action programs in the history of the C.I.A.,' its expenses rivaling those of Operation Cyclone in Afghanistan in the 1980s.⁵⁷ The atrocities US-armed groups since have committed are numerous, and not only have served to destroy social reproduction, such as education and health care, but also have been designed to inflict extensive psychological terror. One such incident occurred when a group the Obama Administration openly acknowledged was US-funded, Nour al-Din al-Zinki, beheaded a 12-year-old Palestinian boy in Aleppo after accusing him of being a member of the predominantly Palestinian Liwa al-Quds Brigade.⁵⁸ The US has relied on macabre methods of torture and mutilation before in the Phoenix Program, and in that case the objective also entailed instilling fear in the population: just as the grisly torture and murders of Phoenix were designed to terrorize the support base of the Vietnamese National Liberation Front, perhaps, too, the beheading of Abdullah Issa should be read as an act of anti-Palestinian terror.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Gary Gambill (2012) Two Cheers for Syrian Islamists, *Foreign Policy*. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/08/23/two-cheers-for-syrian-islamists/>, accessed November 29, 2021.

⁵⁵ Department of Defense Release (2015) from *Judicial Watch*. Available at: <https://www.judicialwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Pg.-291-Pgs.-287-293-JW-v-DOD-and-State-14-812-DOD-Release-2015-04-10-final-version11.pdf>, accessed November 29, 2021.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Mark Mazzetti, Adam Goldman, and Michael S. Schmidt (2017), Behind the Sudden Death of a \$1 Billion Secret C.I.A. War in Syria, *The New York Times*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/middleeast/cia-syria-rebel-arm-train-trump.html>, accessed May 6, 2022.

⁵⁸ Nabih Bulos (2016) Syrian rebels once supported by US appear to behead child in video, *The Los Angeles Times*. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-syria-beheading-video-20160719-snap-story.html>, accessed December 8, 2021.

⁵⁹ For examples of the kinds of practices US intelligence, Special Forces and their South Vietnamese proxies carried out during the Phoenix Program that resemble acts of "Syrian rebels," see Chapters 3 ("Covert Action") and 10 ("Action Programs") in Douglas Valentine (1992), *The Phoenix Program* (New York :Avon Books). In another mirror between the tactics of the US's proxies in Vietnam and Syria, Noam Chomsky cites an instance of an Army of the Republic of Vietnam soldier disemboweling an enemy soldier and eating his organs, presaging the 2013 video footage of Syrian rebel "Abu Sakkar" cutting out and eating the heart of a Syrian Army soldier. See: Noam Chomsky (1969), *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York: Pantheon Books), pp. 40, and Salma Abdelaziz and Holly Yan (2013) Video: Syrian rebel cuts out soldier's heart, eats it, *CNN*. Available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2013/05/14/world/meast/syria-eaten-heart/index.html>, accessed December 8, 2021.

The same rationale should be applied to the most notorious opposition group in Syria, ISIS. In 2015, Obama's Secretary of State, John Kerry, while exercising the 'plausible deniability' clause by saying that US allies (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey) pumped 'a huge amount of weapons, a huge amount of money' into the Syrian opposition, did acknowledge in a private meeting with Syrian opposition figures that the US tried to use ISIS to pull concessions from Assad: 'We saw that Daesh (Islamic State) was growing in strength and we thought Assad wasn't. We could probably manage that Assad might then negotiate, but instead of negotiating he got Putin to support him.'⁶⁰ ISIS was 'threatening to go to Damascus,' Kerry noted, and that is what prompted the direct Russian intervention. As established in a French court, one of ISIS's sources of funding—\$15.3 million worth of income—during its tenure in Syria was the French cement company Lafarge.⁶¹ As reported in *Le Monde*, the company's factory in Northern Syria also became a base for US and French Special Operations forces.⁶² In 2021, the French government, which participated in the US-led missile strikes on Syrian armed forces in 2017 and 2018, lost its own claim to plausible deniability regarding ISIS: French intelligence, recent court documents attest, was aware of Lafarge's payments to ISIS as they were being made.⁶³

2014-2016: Direct US Bombing of Syria

Leaked cables reveal that US intelligence to nurture Kurdish secessionism precede the outbreak of the war in 2011. In 2006, State Department official William Roebuck, a common figure of both the Bush and Obama Administrations, expressed the desirability of '[highlighting] Kurdish complaints' with 'the goal ... to destabilize the Syrian government,' an idea that led to the State Department furnishing funds to the Kurdish Future Party.⁶⁴ By 2014, the US was leveraging the threat of ISIS to enlist the majority-Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) as collaborators. Operation Inherent Resolve, the name lent to US bombing campaigns ostensibly targeting ISIS, began over Syria in September of 2014, with the help and cooperation of the YPG. In January of 2016, the US took control over from the YPG of an airbase at Rmeilan as

⁶⁰ Philip Weiss (2017) US watched ISIS rise in Syria and hoped to 'manage' it—Kerry on leaked tape, *Mondoweiss*, Available at: <https://mondoweiss.net/2017/01/watched-manage-leaked/>, accessed December 10, 2021.

⁶¹ *France 24* (2021) French firm Lafarge loses bid to dismiss 'crimes against humanity' case in Syria. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20210907-french-firm-lafarge-loses-bid-to-dismiss-crimes-against-humanity-case-in-syria>, accessed December 10, 2021.

⁶² Madjid Zerrouky, Benjamin Barthe, and Allan Kaval (2016) L'usine Lafarge en Syrie est devenue une base des forces spéciales occidentales, *Le Monde*. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2016/06/21/l-usine-lafarge-en-syrie-est-devenue-une-base-des-forces-speciales-occidentales_4955033_3210.html, accessed December 10, 2021.

⁶³ Anadolu Agency Staff (2021) Anadolu Agency accesses documents showing French intelligence aware of Lafarge financing Daesh/ISIS. Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/anadolu-agency-accesses-documents-showing-french-intelligence-aware-of-lafarge-financing-daesh-isis/2357992>, accessed December 10, 2021.

⁶⁴ Robert Reuel Naiman (2015) WikiLeaks Reveals How the US Aggressively Pursued Regime Change in Syria, Igniting a Bloodbath, *Truthout*. Available at: <https://truthout.org/articles/wikileaks-reveals-how-the-us-aggressively-pursued-regime-change-in-syria-igniting-a-bloodbath/>, accessed November 29, 2021. I used this article

part of a direct military occupation involving both US military personnel and private contractors.⁶⁵

The collaboration between the US and the YPG transformed the structure of the latter entity through the creation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), whose leadership explicitly pledged support to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and opened up oil trade deals with the US Republican Party and Israel.⁶⁶ In 2019, *Al-Akhbar* reported that Ilham Ehmadi, Chairperson of the SDF's Syrian Democratic Council, signed off on giving exclusive exploration and selling rights to oil in US-occupied Syrian territory to Israeli businessman Moti Kahana, founder of the Amaliah NGO, dedicated to using 'humanitarian aid' in Idlib for 'improving the public image' of Israel in Syria while calling on the US and Israel to carry out regime change.^{67,68} In December of 2020, arch-reactionary US Sen. Lindsay Graham announced that in July, 'US-backed, Kurdish-led forces had granted an American company a deal 'to modernize the oil fields' in areas of northeastern Syria guarded by US troops.'⁶⁹ The company in charge was Delta Crescent Energy, a major donor to Republican Party causes, 'founded by US Army Delta Force veteran James Reese, former diplomat James Cain, and former GulfSands Petroleum executive John P. Dorrier Jr,' which the Trump Administration helped gain exclusive access to draining Syrian oil.⁷⁰ Among other of Reese's ventures is the private security firm TigerSwan, which grew to national prominence in the US for its role surveilling and repressing Lakota-led protests against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline near the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. TigerSwan played a role of its own in the occupation of Syria, helping to guard US demining operations in Raqqa.

Although the official rationale for Inherent Resolve was to target ISIS, the bombings continued the environmental destruction and societal fracturing that began with the covert arming of groups like ISIS in the first place. About Raqqa, *The Marine Corps Times* bragged that a Marine artillery battalion fired more rounds there 'than any artillery battalion since Vietnam.'⁷¹ Army Sgt. Major. John Wayne Troxell said that in

⁶⁵ Diana al Rifai (2016) US 'takes control' of Rmeilan airfield in Syria, *Al Jazeera*. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/1/20/us-takes-control-of-rmeilan-airfield-in-syria>, accessed November 29, 2021.

⁶⁶ The chairperson of the SDF's Syrian Democratic Council, Ilham Ehmadi, praised the Saudi monarchy in an interview with the pro-government Saudi newspaper *Al-Riyadh*. See: Hadil Owais (2017) Ra'is souria al democratiya: d'am qatar al 'antiqua'i shaq safouf al muardha, *Al-Riyadh*, Available at: <https://www.alriyadh.com/1600918>, accessed December 10, 2021. See also, in an interview with Dutch journalist Wladimir van Wilgenburg, Ehmadi asserted, in contrast to her attitude toward the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, she would not allow Iran to "create a corridor" through SDF territory. See Wilgenburg's comment at: <https://twitter.com/vvanwilgenburg/status/875741531495378944>, accessed December 10, 2021.

⁶⁷ Misam Razzaq (2019) Nift al-Shariq al-Souri biyed Israel, *Al-Akhbar*. Available at: https://al-akhbar.com/Arab/273525?fbclid=IwAR1YGjCWgdkWe2bVs_CNTfJoV2oAlicsk-Lp159Rnn5KQu0NxcnGQcZA1c, accessed December 10, 2021.

⁶⁸ Tamara Zieve (2017) Israelis step up Syrian aid efforts, but plan to absorb orphans is held up, *Jerusalem Post*. Available at: <https://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Israelis-step-up-Syrian-aid-efforts-but-plan-to-absorb-orphans-is-held-up-486226>, accessed December 10, 2021.

⁶⁹ Matthew Petti (2020) Trump administration helped GOP donors get Syria oil deal, *Responsible Statecraft*. Available at: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/12/09/trump-administration-helped-gop-donors-get-syria-oil-deal/?fbclid=IwAR2JLmSFAMldeQHXdBbfkFCivnKNq3hgbMf79Ndc5XpyF1patmRyrk4wHfA>, accessed December 10, 2021.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Shawn Snow (2018) These Marines in Syria fired more artillery than any battalion since Vietnam, *Marine Corps Times*. Available at: <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2018/02/06/these-marines-in-syria-fired-more-artillery-than-any-battalion-since-vietnam/#.Wnp-Vy9uSGM.facebook>, accessed December 10, 2021.

‘five months they fired 35,000 artillery rounds.’ By comparison, in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, just over 34, 000 artillery rounds were fired. Naturally, the bombings were even more destructive. A reporter who visited post-bombing Raqqa, Kate Allen, said that ‘[never] before [had she] seen a city so completely devastated’—it was ‘widely considered the most-destroyed city of modern times,’ with over 11,000 buildings rendered uninhabitable.⁷² The use of white phosphorus punctuated the US aerial bombardment. The US military sought to ‘flatten’ Raqqa (and Mosul in neighboring Iraq) to create what Army Maj. John W. Spencer calls a ‘feral city’: ‘an environment filled with sewage, failing infrastructure and even packs of wild dogs.’⁷³

Those who charge that the Syrian government’s campaign against the CIA’s proxies is simply an imitation of the US’s War on Terror miss the point that the US’s bombing of Syria was itself, in legal terms, an explicit continuation of the War on Terror. It cannot be forgotten or ignored that the distinguishing tenet of the Global War on Terror was not simply a claim to be engaged in combat against ‘terrorists,’ but rather to nullify Asian and African countries’ right to national sovereignty. For this reason, Latin American governments, led by Mexico, have taken intense interest in Operation Inherent Resolve, seeing it as the basis for possible future threats against their own sovereignty. The standard the US used to justify bombing Syria—that nations ‘unwilling or unable’ to deal with the threat of ‘terrorism’ will give up the right to sovereignty—dates back to Bush’s Global War on Terror, when John Bellinger, a State Department advisor, convened a meeting with a small group of lawyers from the UK, Australia, Canada, and from West Point military academy.⁷⁴ The Obama and Trump Administrations subsequently used the standard to override the consent of the Damascus government.

The overall US strategy in destabilizing and weakening Syria as a social and cultural entity cannot be understood fully without reference to the role of Israel, which itself has armed proxies and carried out bombings in Syria. Israel’s arms transfers were the center of the controversy around Sidqi al-Maqt, a Golan-based supporter of the Syrian government who, after having spent 27 years in prison for engaging in resistance operations against the occupation, was re-sentenced to prison for espionage after he documented and posted to Facebook, with photographs and videos, the Israeli Army supplying Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syria branch of al Qaeda.⁷⁵ For the past decade, Israel has been waging a war of attrition through its bombings in Syria, amounting to something short of a full direct open war, but enough to keep Syrian society in a grinder and impair its ability to redevelop. Bombing targets have been political—

⁷² Kate Allen (2019) Raqqa is in Ruins Like a Modern Dresden. This is Not ‘Precision Bombing’, *The Guardian*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/23/raqqra-ruins-bombing?fbclid=IwAR3W4rRJIQwIZcjE3jwcyhgTceSC-2Xm2_JvtTdZ4V6SXpvp6mg2gijYkerk, accessed December 10, 2021.

⁷³ Kyle Rempfer (2019) Why US Troops ‘Flattened’ Raqqa And Mosul, And Why It May Herald An Era Of ‘Feral City’ Warfare, *Military Times*. Available at: https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2019/04/29/why-us-troops-flattened-raqqra-and-mosul-and-what-it-means-for-future-fights/?fbclid=IwAR0qOOjRhOET1pEeSIIIYbxaj36j-dlkX7_X3hUqoQ_7leMwke40yajrlCE, accessed December 10, 2021.

⁷⁴ Julian Borger (2019) Latin Americans Fear Precedent Set By Legal Justification For Syria Intervention, *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/02/latin-americans-fear-precedent-set-by-legal-justification-for-syria-intervention>, accessed December 10, 2021.

⁷⁵ Nour Samaha (2015) The Curious Case Of Israel, al-Nusra and ‘Facebook Spy’, *Al Jazeera*. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/4/27/the-curious-case-of-israel-al-nusra-and-facebook-spy>, accessed December 10, 2021.

striking weapons depots, and members of Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad—as well as economic, such as the December, 2021, bombing of Syria’s primary civil port in Latakia, which imports commodities like clothes, construction materials, and food staples.⁷⁶ Donald Trump’s Special Representative for Syria, James Jeffrey, explicitly referred to such actions as ‘US-supported Israeli strikes in Syria,’ part of a ‘multi-pillar US strategy in the region’ against Iran.⁷⁷

2017-2021: The US Occupation of Syria

Since at least 2017, the goals of the US occupation of Syria have been the following: to use its base at Al Tanf to cut off vital supply routes between Iran and Syria; to sabotage and destroy vital Syrian natural resources, such as water supplies and wheat fields, preventing postwar reconstruction; and to control Syria’s oil fields and leverage them as a pressure point to induce changes in Syrian policy regarding Iran and Palestinian resistance groups.⁷⁸ The seeds for the seizure of Syrian oil fields were germinated as far back as the 1980s, when US intelligence officials identified oil supply as a potential weak point in Syria’s development model. As one 1986 intelligence assessment put it, ‘Oil is central to Syria’s economic health,’ accounting at the time for up to 60 percent of Syria’s exports. US intelligence officers noted that Syria was still a net importer of oil, depending on Iranian crude to develop its own resources, and in dire need of Western-monopolized supplies and expertise.⁷⁹ Although at the time Syria was driving toward self-sufficiency in oil production, a lack of inputs forced the country into a foreign exchange deficit.

Most of the oil that made Syria a candidate for self-sufficiency was discovered around Deir ez-Zor in 1984.⁸⁰ These were the very oil fields that US troops captured in October of 2017, occupying 30 percent of the country’s territory, where 90 percent of the country’s pre-war oil production took place. US forces did proceed to steal from these oil fields in open acts of piracy, but they did not do so out of US necessity or demand. After all, the US was maintaining its long-standing petrodollar-infused relationship with the Saudi Kingdom and, by some measures, had become the world’s leading crude oil producer in 2018. US forces were instead holding Syrian oil hostage, preventing the country from being able to use it for reserve currency or for local redevelopment in post-war areas. To understand what exactly the US was demanding as ransom, it helps to avoid narrow economism and instead consider what Atif

⁷⁶ *Reuters* (2021) Syria says Israeli attacks Latakia port with air strike. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-aggression-targets-syrias-latakia-port-area-state-tv-2021-12-07/>, accessed December 10, 2021.

⁷⁷ Seth J. Frantzman (2021) US Support for Israeli Airstrikes in Syria has been Important Recently, *The Jerusalem Post*. Available at: <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/us-support-for-israeli-airstrikes-in-syria-has-been-important-recently-655651>, accessed May 11, 2022.

⁷⁸ For information on the strategic location of the Al Tanf airbase for the US, see: *Al Mayadeen* (2020) *Limatha Souria?*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pajNwBzdIO0&ab_channel=AlMayadeenDocumentaries-%D9%88%D8%AB%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86, accessed December 14, 2021.

⁷⁹ Central Intelligence Agency (1986) *Syria: Driving Toward Oil Self-Sufficiency*. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP86T01017R000302840001-3.pdf>, accessed November 29, 2021.

⁸⁰ Thomas Collelo (ed.) (1987) *Syria: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress). Available at: <http://countrystudies.us/syria/44.htm>, accessed December 13, 2021.

Kubursi and Salim Mansur wrote about the US's real agenda in relation to the 1974 oil embargo: that the 'American quarrel with the Arabs' was not actually OPEC's heightened oil prices, but that Arabs at last had found in oil a 'diplomatic weapon' capable of changing 'the political status quo in the region,' one defined by deep division among Arab leaders, immiserated and deprived Arab populations, and Israeli technological, military, and financial supremacy. In 1974 as today, politics are primary, particularly as they relate to the Palestinian issue.⁸¹ The political concessions the Trump Administration demanded from the SAR were consistent with those pressed by the Bush and Obama Administrations before it. As James Jeffrey stated in a speech to the Aspen Institute, the SAR could not get back 50 percent of arable land and 66 percent of its oil back without negotiating with the US and removing Iranian forces from the country.⁸²

The US Marines' control over Syrian oil fields has led to environmental disaster. Crude leaked from battered pipelines into tributaries and rivers. Floods spilled blackened oil-infused water onto essential soils, destroying crops and setting off fires that discharge toxic flames into the air. What was once green has gone dead and gray. The occupation has brought mass death to nature itself. Of course, environmental calamity means human tragedy. A pharmacist from the Deir ez-Zor countryside is quoted as saying that birth defects have become common, while diseases once eradicated from the area, including meningitis and respiratory illnesses, have returned wherever there are high concentrations of oil wells.⁸³ The Syrian government has accused US Marines of deliberately destroying farmers' crops and agricultural lands.⁸⁴ US-led strategic de-development has ripped Syria to shreds, threatened partition, and plummeted its wealth. Sanctions further starve and devastate the country. The few English-language reports that have examined the human impact of these sanctions have described homes left frigid without proper wall insulation; families left malnourished without food and clean drinking water; and hospitals bereft of essential medicines and technologies.⁸⁵

The scale and diversity of this suffering reveals that the US-led war not only has been largely covert, but also multifaceted. Where the US could not invade itself, it secretly enlisted invaders. For what the US could not fund itself, it likewise appointed funders. When the US could not overthrow the Syrian government, it opted to destroy Syria—state, society, and nature alike—through bombings, occupation, and sanctions. When the US could not change or bend the direction of Syrian politics and its international relations, it opted to punish the Syrian people as a compromise. If total victory became impossible because of the weight of resistance, attrition would have to

⁸¹ Atif Kubursi and Salim Mansur (1993) Oil and the Gulf War: An 'American century' or a 'new world order', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 15(4), pp. 1–17.

⁸² The Aspen Institute (2019) The Role of the US in Syria: Planning for the Future. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bu69yPntB40&ab_channel=TheAspenInstitute, accessed December 13, 2021.

⁸³ Dan Wilkofsky and Amberin Zaman (2020) US troops 'secure' northeast Syria oil, as contamination from it imperils lives, *Al Monitor*. Available at: https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/06/northeast-syria-oil-pollution-kurds-refineries.html?fbclid=IwAR1_N3_gbhGPNYAtHP9tpCBDWewU-I-u9D8Wq8nOVZAMReTkHFrJLvJALFc#ixzz6R21YTLJt, accessed November 29, 2021.

⁸⁴ Tom O'Connor (2021) Syria Sends First Message to President Biden: Withdraw Troops, Stop Stealing Oil, *Newsweek*. Available at: https://www.newsweek.com/syria-first-message-biden-withdraw-troops-stop-stealing-oil1563165?fbclid=IwAR1nKdCZd_5xKKDK3M0ewwNLGn5mNM35S19MiXKSqVfpiQspMY6EAfndkSs, accessed November 29, 2021.

⁸⁵ Chris Ray (2020) Sanctioning Syria, *Monthly Review*. Available at: <https://mronline.org/2020/01/10/sanctioning-syria/>, accessed December 13, 2021.

do: the US would try to make sure that the best possible victory for which Syria could hope, after daring to spurn its global dictatorship, would be a Pyrrhic one. The web of relations on which the US relied to accomplish its mass destruction continued over a half century of alliances united through the common goals, first of stopping revolution; and second, of *turning back* revolution, in the Arab region. Indeed, many aspects of past Arab revolutions have been overturned, even if revolutionary movements themselves have not been stopped.

Conclusion: Syria as Palestine's Strategic Depth

The weight of the evidence has become increasingly heavy and its substance is indisputable: the US planned, prepared for, and launched a major war targeting both the state and society of Syria. The aims and effects of this war have been consistent with centuries of behavior on the part of the US regime. One must add to this acknowledgment that Syria is not the only country in the Arab region burning on account of wars of aggression waged by the US axis: Libya, Iraq, and Yemen are also burning. The recent history of the latter three nations contains glaring commonalities, state projects that incurred the wrath of US-led imperialism for much the same reasons. Each had successful revolutions that replaced colonial powers' preferred monarchies with anti-colonial republics; each terminated the ownership of US- and Europe-based corporations over natural sources through nationalization programs; each withdrew from the US and Western European orbit in favor of counter-internationalist, anti-systemic projects; and each provided material support to the Palestinian liberation struggle against the Zionist project, a regional site where colonialism in its most direct and exterminatory form, settler-colonialism,⁸⁶ still exists.

Previous generations of Arab revolutionaries argued that there exists a dialectical relationship between the liberation of Palestine and sovereign development throughout the whole Arab region. This problem applies acutely to Syria, which, lest anyone forget, itself has been subject to direct Zionist occupation in the Golan region since 1967. Throughout its existence, this occupation has drained Syrian resources, especially water, to service a settler population and sustain the development of military technology, all with heavy US participation. Meanwhile, the perpetual military threat the Zionist project poses to Syria maladjusts its development and strengthens internal repression by re-directing the state's already compromised budget towards defense spending. The stateless Palestinians confront this obstruction to sovereign development on Syria's southwestern front through their national liberation movement. Yet, in order to succeed, national liberation struggles require a depth of support, both global and regional. The South African Congress (ANC) and Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) both overthrew settler-apartheid with varying degrees and forms of support from independent and relatively stable African countries, a confluence that would have been made much more difficult had those essential depths of Pan African continental support been decapitated or mired in interminable violence. On the flipside, the provisions the Syrian state delivers to the Palestinian national liberation movement have constituted a narrow opening through which Syrians have used infrastructure inherited

⁸⁶ On Zionist settler-colonialism, see article in this same special issue by Max Ajl, 'Logics of Elimination and Settler Colonialism: Decolonization or National Liberation?'

from their own truncated revolution to build, in conditions made unspeakably dangerous by myriad waves and forms of counterrevolution, a broader front against a common enemy. This is a link the managers of US-led imperialism are clearly hellbent on destroying.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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