

CIA-MI6 planned to assassinate Syrian leaders in 1957

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It is hardly surprising that the US vetoed, and Britain abstained from, the United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Israel's recent threat to murder Yasser Arafat. Recently published papers show that assassinations have been part of the US and Britain's foreign policy operations in the Middle East.

An article in the *Guardian* newspaper on Saturday, September 27, outlined plans by America's CIA and Britain's MI6 security forces to overthrow the Syrian government, which was increasingly orientating towards Moscow, and assassinate three of its key leaders. The plan had received approval from the very top of the political establishment: US president Dwight Eisenhower and British prime minister Harold Macmillan.

One important difference between the 1957 plan and Israel's recent declaration should be noted: the former was kept closely under wraps and known to only a select few, not announced publicly, and without fear of international censure as with Israel deputy prime minister Ehud Olmert's threat to Arafat.

Disclosure of the 1957 paper does provide an opportunity to review the role of US and British imperialism in the Middle East.

The US and Britain's covert intervention in Syria to secure control of the region's oil was only one of numerous such operations in the Middle East in the 1950s. Throughout the postwar period, London and Washington had sought to undermine popular nationalist governments in the Middle East that threatened their strategic and economic interests:

* The US and Britain had organised the overthrow of the nationalist Iranian government of Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953.

* Britain had attempted several times to assassinate President Nasser of Egypt, who had ejected the British military base, nationalised the Suez Canal, and secured aid from the Soviet Union to build the Aswan High Dam.

* Britain, France and Israel had invaded Egypt in 1956 in an attempt to seize the Canal, overthrow Nasser, and install a more pliant regime.

While the US, which was determined to replace Britain as the dominant power in the Middle East, forced the British and French to pull out of Egypt, it nevertheless joined the Anglo-French economic blockade of the country. Thus, the Suez war discredited all the Western imperialist powers and drove Egypt and other Arab regimes closer to Moscow.

In March 1957, the US Congress passed what became known as the "Eisenhower Doctrine," which named "international communism" as the greatest threat to the region and promised financial help to any country that tried to resist it. It authorised the president to send US troops to any Middle East country that asked for help against "communist aggression."

When a power struggle broke out a few weeks later in Jordan between King Hussein and his pro-Nasser government, which sought to establish diplomatic links with the Soviet Union, the US despatched the Sixth Fleet to the eastern Mediterranean in a show of support and helped Hussein to overthrow his own government. In Lebanon, the US embassy and the CIA gave assistance to the fascistic pro-Chamoun forces in the parliamentary elections.

Although Syria itself had little oil, as the centre of Arab nationalism it played a key political role in the region and controlled the West's access to Iraq's northern oilfields: the pipeline transporting Iraq's oil to Turkey and the Mediterranean flowed through Syria. It would have no truck with the Baghdad Pact, the alliance of pro-Western states in the Middle East against the Soviet Union, and had refused to accept the Eisenhower Doctrine.

In August 1957, at the height of the Cold War, Syria signed an agreement with Moscow for military and economic aid, recognised China, and appointed Afif al-Bizri, an officer with Stalinist sympathies, as the armed forces' chief of staff.

The Baghdad Pact countries, at a meeting in Ankara attended by senior State Department official Loy Henderson, agreed that "the present regime in Syria had to go; otherwise the takeover by the Communists would be complete." The Soviet Union warned the West against intervening in Syria

as Turkish troops massed along the border with Syria, generating a huge international crisis.

It has long been known that the US and British governments were actively plotting a regime change to prevent Syria falling within Moscow's sphere of influence. But the full extent of the skullduggery and the fact that it included assassinations were not known.

Now the *Guardian* article provides documentary evidence of the conspiracy. It cites a report, found by Matthew Jones, a specialist in British and US postwar foreign policy at the University of London, in the private papers of Duncan Sandys, Macmillan's defence secretary, setting out the nuts and bolts of the plan, including the proposed assassinations.

The document was drawn up in Washington by the top echelons of the CIA and the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), as MI6 was then called. It shows that they planned to use agents provocateurs to launch a series of incidents. These events would create political turmoil to provide a pretext by Syria's pro-Western neighbours to mount an invasion in support of the government's right-wing opponents. A key element of the plan was to assassinate three leading figures: Abd al-Hamid, head of Syrian military intelligence, Afif al-Bizri, the pro-Soviet chief of staff, and Khalid Bakdash, leader of the Syrian Communist Party.

The report was quite plain. It stated, "In order to facilitate the action of liberative forces, reduce the capabilities of the Syrian regime to organise and direct its military actions, to hold losses and destruction to a minimum, and to bring about desired action in the shortest possible time, a special effort should be made to *eliminate* certain key individuals. The removal should be accomplished early in the course of the uprising and intervention and in the light of the circumstances existing at the time" [emphasis added].

"Once a political decision is reached to proceed with internal disturbances in Syria, CIA is prepared, and SIS [MI6] will attempt, to mount minor sabotage and coup de main incidents within Syria, working through contacts with individuals.

"The two services should consult, as appropriate, to avoid overlapping or interfering with each other's activities... Incidents should not be concentrated in Damascus; the operation should not be overdone; and to the extent possible care should be taken to avoid causing key leaders of the Syrian regime to take additional personal protection measures."

According to the *Guardian*, once the general climate of fear had been created, they would stage frontier incidents and border clashes to provide a pretext for Iraq and Jordan, then under British tutelage, to invade. Syria had to be "made to appear as the sponsor of plots, sabotage and violence directed against neighbouring governments," the report said.

It went on to say, "CIA and SIS should use their capabilities in both the psychological and action fields to augment tension". In other words, they should organise "sabotage, national conspiracies and various strong arm activities" in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq, responsibility for which were to be attributed to Damascus. These were operations in which the special political action section of the SIS specialised during the 1940s and 1950s, before it supposedly became a purely intelligence-gathering agency.

A "Free Syria Committee" should be funded and "political factions with paramilitary or other actionist capabilities" in Syria should be armed. The CIA and MI6 should stir up trouble and encourage uprisings against the government by the Druze minority in the south and the Muslim Brotherhood in Damascus. They should help to free political prisoners in the notorious Mezza prison.

The aim was to replace the government that had the backing of both the Baathists and Moscow with one that was pro-Western. Such a regime would, the report recognised, be unpopular and "would probably need to rely first upon repressive measures and arbitrary exercise of power".

In the event, the plan came to nothing. Faced with the possibility of Turkey invoking the Eisenhower Doctrine and calling for US support against Syria, Egypt's president Nasser railed against the US and its lackeys in the Arab world, particularly Iraq and Jordan, and despatched a small military contingent to Syria. This had the desired effect. Nasser was seen as the defender of Arab nationalism, while the Jordanian and Iraqi governments were widely reviled as craven supporters of Western imperialism at the expense of their own people.

With popular opinion vehemently against them, the pro-imperialist governments were forced to do an about-face to save their political skins. The Jordanian foreign minister denied that it had ever been Jordan's intention to interfere in Syria's domestic affairs, while Nuri al-Said, the Iraqi prime minister, lied and said there was "complete understanding with the Syrian President." The Saudi king urged Eisenhower to proceed with caution and moderation.

Without political cover from the Arab regimes, a Turkish invasion of Syria would have been unacceptable, so the CIA-MI6 plans fell apart.



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