

# US seeks to exploit anti-Assad movement in Syria

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Tens of thousands are protesting in Syria against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. There was further bloody repression by the right-wing dictatorship on Sunday and Tuesday, as police and soldiers opened fire on demonstrators in Homs, a city of 700,000 near the Turkish border.

Assad has responded to the protests over the past month with a mixture of dubious concessions and brutal violence. The shootings in Homs and nearby towns were followed by the announcement that Assad was ending the state of emergency in effect since the Baath Party took power in Syria in 1963. What that means in practice remains to be seen, since the regime has many other instruments of repression, legal and extra-legal.

The 45-year-old Assad inherited power in 2000 from his father Hafez, who had ruled since leading a military coup in 1970. Two thirds of the population have known no other ruler than the Assads, father and son.

As with the movements in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere in the region, the protests are fuelled by fundamental democratic and social grievances. Like these other movements, however, in the absence of an independent socialist alternative, US imperialism is seeking to shape demands for “regime change” in its own interests.

According to a front-page report Monday in the *Washington Post*, for the past several years, the US State Department has secretly funded Syrian opposition parties, civil rights groups and a satellite TV channel in the name of “democracy building” as part of a wider US programme targeting the Middle East.

The clear aim has been to replace the Assad regime with a pliant Washington-friendly government, made up of regime defectors and CIA operatives who would end Syria’s relations with Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Palestine.

This is part of its wider policy of “rolling back” Syria,

first outlined in 1996 by neo-cons later to serve in the Bush administration and the clique around soon-to-be Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the document, “A Clean Break.”

According to cables published by WikiLeaks, the State Department provided \$6 million to an Islamic group, the Movement for Justice and Development, similar to Turkey’s ruling party of the same name, set up by Syrian exiles in London. This funded the operation of Barada TV, named after a river that runs through Damascus, the Syrian capital, and financed activities in Syria.

The US financed dissident Syrian exiles through government programmes such as its Middle East Partnership Initiative, under the guise of grants and scholarships for “leadership” programmes in Middle East countries. While the State Department claimed that the Middle East Partnership Initiative had spent \$7.5 million on Syrian programmes since 2005, one cable cited a much higher figure of \$12 million between 2005 and 2010.

Syrian dissidents have received funding from the Los Angeles-based Democracy Council, which ran a Syria-related program called the “Civil Society Strengthening Initiative” funded with \$6.3 million from the State Department. The programme is described as “a discrete collaborative effort between the Democracy Council and local partners” to produce, among other things, “various broadcast concepts”, which included Barada TV.

The council’s founder and president, James Prince, a former congressional staff member and investment adviser for PwC, the international financial services firm, told the *New York Times* that he was “familiar with” Barada TV and the Syrian exile group in London, but refused to provide more details of its activities.

According to the cables, Syrian intelligence officials knew that Washington was funding dissidents abroad, sparking fears among US diplomats that the entire operation had been exposed.

Washington first began to take an active interest in promoting Syrian dissidents in February 2005, after the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister and billionaire businessman Rafiq Hariri.

The US and the major powers immediately attributed the assassination, without evidence, to Syria. It used the claim to insist on the removal of all Syrian forces from Lebanon, to establish a United Nations inquiry into the assassination, and to destabilise Syria.

Since the US lacked a credible pro-Washington opposition in Syria, Congress voted an undeclared sum of money to fund groups and invited them to Washington. It orchestrated the Damascus Declaration, the “pro-democracy” group named after the document of the same name, penned in October 2005 by Michel Kilo. Its guiding principles speak vaguely of “democracy” and “oppositional unity” in a manner that fitted neatly with Washington’s requirements, while making no mention of an economic platform to address widespread social grievances.

The group was a motley collection of Syria’s discredited and tiny political parties, including nominally “socialist” and “communist”, Arab Nationalist and Kurdish nationalist, Islamist groups, several human rights groups, single-issue associations, and individual activists and writers.

The Damascus Declaration was published just before the UN’s interim report on the Hariri assassination, to take advantage of the international media attention on Syria. The Bush administration sought to use the interim report, expected to implicate senior Syrian and Lebanese officials for the murder, to call for UN sanctions against Syria and threaten retaliation against Damascus for supposedly encouraging Iraqi insurgents. This, it hoped, would exacerbate the acute political crisis in Damascus created by its expulsion from Lebanon.

The administration even invited one of its members, Dr Kamal al-Labwani, who had been jailed for three years in Syria for organising political meetings and has subsequently been imprisoned again, to the White House. In January 2006, Washington played host to a conference of Syrian dissidents, including the Damascus Declaration groups and exiles.

Abdul Halim Khaddam, the Syrian Vice President and a wealthy businessman with close links to the slain Hariri, defected and fled to Paris in late 2005. In January 2006, Khaddam declared he was forming a Syrian government in exile and consolidated his links with anti-Syria forces

in Lebanon.

According to another cable, dated August 2006, Hariri’s son Saad, who had become the leader of the pro-Washington March 14 Alliance, was in discussions on replacing the Assad regime. He said this would involve collaboration between the Muslim Brotherhood and some of the officials from the old regime, such as Khaddam and former Chief of Staff Hikmat al-Shihabi.

But Washington’s plans were thwarted by the failure of Israel’s military assault to eradicate Hezbollah as a military and political force from Lebanon. The Israeli defeat and the deeply compromised pro-Washington Lebanese government, which had supported Israel against Hezbollah, served to strengthen the Assad regime against its US-backed opponents, many of whom were imprisoned.

The Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz* has published details of another US-inspired plot against Syria. It reported that in 2008, the Saudi national security advisor and long time ambassador to Washington, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, and Jeffrey Feltman, a veteran US diplomat in the Middle East and assistant secretary of state for Middle East Affairs, had hatched a \$2 billion plot to destabilise Syria and overthrow the Assad regime. While it is unknown whether this plan was put into operation, some of the features of the recent unrest bear a striking similarity to its proposals, whose purpose was to foment ethnic and sectarian tensions.

At the very least, the leaked cables confirm what Assad has publicly claimed, that the US government was playing a role in instigating protests against the regime. While Assad’s charges have generally been dismissed in the US and European media, there clearly were plans that could be activated to take advantage of any domestic uprising to install a more pliant regime.



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