

British government planned a 100,000-strong Syrian proxy force

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British plans developed in 2012 for the creation of a huge “rebel” army to march on Damascus and overthrow Syrian president Bashar al-Assad have been exposed.

According to an investigation by the BBC’s flagship *Newsnight* TV programme, the scheme was one of a number of proposals put together by the British military at the behest of the government of Prime Minister David Cameron.

In late 2012, US-led pressures for a direct assault on Syria were escalating rapidly. In November of that year, British Foreign Secretary William Hague hailed the founding of a “united” Syrian opposition and pledged to support them by recognising them as the legitimate government and calling for the removal of a European Union arms embargo. The British government, the plans make clear, was also seeking a major military role in a new bloody neo-colonial adventure.

Drawn up by the British Army’s then most senior military figure, Chief of the Defence Staff General Sir David Richards, formerly the head of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) forces in Afghanistan, the plan envisaged a 100,000-strong force composed of Syrian recruits opposed to the Assad regime. According to the *Guardian*, Richards’ plan was backed by then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta and David Petraeus, former CIA director and architect of the US military’s 2007 surge in Iraq.

According to *Newsnight*, Richards advised the government that it would take a year to recruit, arm and train a force capable of driving Assad from power. Training would be in Jordan and Turkey and, by recruiting Syrians would avoid British “boots on the ground.”

Once battle-ready, the army of Syrian “moderates” would, under cover of a “shock and awe” air war designed to destroy Syrian air defences and government infrastructure, seek to emulate both the US Army’s 2003 assault on Iraq and the 2011 destruction of the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi. Simultaneous with the war preparations, Richards’ plan proposed the formation of a Syrian government-in-exile to be installed after Assad’s overthrow.

The plan for such a substantial proxy force emerged out of tensions between the British government and military. In 2012, the *Guardian* reported that Richards, at the request of Cameron, chaired a meeting of military brass from France, the US, Turkey, Jordan, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates—presumably to sketch out their options.

Richards, however, had let it be known publicly that the British military had serious qualms about any attack on Syria in which British forces would be involved—the fourth major war in a decade. Concerns focused on the extended naval and air operation required to destroy Syrian air defences, the lack of both a clear plan and any exit strategy. Press reports also noted that the then lack of a large aircraft carrier would compromise British capacity to participate in the enforcement of a no-fly zone.

Also, according to the *Daily Telegraph*’s defence correspondent Con Coughlin, elements in the military were more concerned than the Cameron government about the dangers of such an intervention spiraling rapidly. Coughlin wrote last week of military trepidation: “if you set up a no-fly zone and it comes under attack from the Syrian regime, then you have to respond. Then, if you respond, the Assad regime’s allies—notably Russia and Iran—will feel compelled to intervene themselves, and before you know it you have

the seeds of World War Three being sown.”

Coughlin added that “training a Syrian army might also give Britain some influence over the conflict’s outcome.”

As it happened, Richards’ proxy army was shelved following the August 2013 defeat suffered by Cameron at the hands of the Labour Party and Tory opponents of such a reckless and incendiary move. The Westminster vote was cast in the face of popular hostility to a new war and was followed by the expression of similar concerns in the US Congress. These forced the Obama administration into a tactical manoeuvre aimed at parking the Syrian conflict, seeking some level of limited rapprochement with Iran while escalating its conflict with Russia—via the installation of the current fascist backed right wing regime in Kiev.

In the intervening months, the US position in Syria and Iraq has unravelled under the impact of the sectarian civil war stoked for a decade by the US and Britain. Swathes of Iraq and Syria have fallen to forces organised under the umbrella of Saudi Arabia-backed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and armed by the US through its ongoing proxy operations against Syria. Some \$287 million has been channeled to Syrian opposition forces since 2011.

As a result, variants of Richards’ plan are back on the agenda. In June, the Obama administration asked Congress to authorise \$500 million in US military aid to Syrian insurgents as part of a much larger \$65.8 billion request for Overseas Contingency Operations. The White House claimed to be seeking “vetted elements of the armed opposition” capable of being forged into a force capable of opposing ISIS.

Additional US cash poured into the fractious insurgents amounts only to the US government pouring petrol on the Syrian fire it has created. Only further catastrophe and mass bloodshed in Syria and the entire region can emerge from its policy.

For his part, Richards, now Baron Richards of Herstmonceux, a Knight of the Order of Bath, retired and with a life peerage, has taken to calling for increased British military spending and the militarisation of society. Richards, who while still an army chief in 2010, called for a new British “grand strategy” to “decide what Britain’s place in the world is” used his maiden speech in the House of Lords to warn of a “generational” threat of militant jihadism. He

called for arms spending to be maintained at a minimum of 2 percent of British GDP and demanded a “societal consensus” that “joining the Armed Forces is a good thing.”

Last week, in a further marker of British imperialism’s determination to increase its global fighting capacity, the Queen launched one of two Royal Navy new super-carriers at the Rosyth naval dockyard in Scotland. The new strike carriers, costing to date £6.2 billion and to be equipped with up to 36 F-35 fighter aircraft and helicopters, will be the most powerful surface warships outside of the US Navy and are intended “to project power around the world.”



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