

Amid US talks with Iran, France debates rapprochement with Syria's Assad

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An unofficial delegation of four French parliamentarians traveled to Damascus last month, meeting with Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad on February 25, as US-led talks in Geneva move towards a possible normalization of relations between Washington and Iran, Syria's main regional ally.

The delegates were PS deputy Gérard Bapt and conservatives Pierre Vial, François Zocchetto and Jacques Myard—all members of the parliamentary France-Syria Friendship group, which Bapt chairs.

The trip produced some embarrassment in the French ruling elite. Paris broke diplomatic relations with President Bashar al-Assad's regime in 2012 and even recognized the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) group, which has since collapsed, as Syria's government. It pressed aggressively for war with Syria in 2013, only to back down when the Obama administration decided not to go to war. Amid shifting US relations with Iran and attempts to assemble a coalition of proxies against the Islamic State (IS) militia, however, Paris is considering whether to bring Assad in from the cold.

In line with the propaganda that has predominated until now, President François Hollande and Prime Minister Manuel Valls issued cynical denunciations of the four parliamentarians for dealing with a “dictator” and “butcher” of his own people. Of course, such hypocritical humanitarian posturing did not prevent Paris from selling dozens of Rafale fighters last month to President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi of Egypt, whose regime has carried out mass slaughters of Egyptians in the streets.

PS first secretary Jean-Christophe Cambadélis announced on February 26 that Bapt would be disciplined for his diplomatic outreach to Syria.

Paul Quilès, a defense minister under PS president François Mitterrand (1981-1995), defended the

delegation in *Le Figaro*, however, declaring such criticisms “excessive” and “unjust.” Deputies of the conservative Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) also defended their initiative.

A previously inaudible faction pressing for working with Assad is now out in the open. On February 27, *Le Monde* described the forces supporting a policy shift as a “heterogeneous coalition stretching from the far right (National Front) to the radical left,” including the pro-Russian lobby, pro-Iranian supporters of former PS prime minister Michel Rocard, Catholic traditionalists, and France's oil and defence corporations.

The debate over how to proceed in imperialist circles testifies to the disaster unleashed in the Middle East by the NATO proxy wars against Libya and Syria, fought by Islamist insurgents and supported by pseudo-left groups like France's New Anti-capitalist Party.

Syrian society has been shattered by a brutal imperialist proxy war for regime change, justified through the demonisation of the Assad regime. Over 200,000 Syrians have been killed, and over 10 million displaced, with at least 3.3 million Syrian refugees abroad and 7.2 million displaced within Syria itself, according to UN figures.

The imperialist powers' moves towards Assad, faced with the emergence of IS from the chaos their war has provoked in the region, makes clear that their wars to dominate the oil-rich region were peddled on the basis of lies and hypocrisy.

Laurent Fabius and Philip Hammond, French and British Foreign Ministers respectively, tried to maintain the old line in a joint statement published in *Le Monde* on February 27. They rejected Assad's “moves to rehabilitate himself” by trying “to take advantage of the fright provoked by IS.”

Nonetheless, Fabius and Hammond proposed that

elements of the Assad regime would continue to play a role in Syria. They foresaw an alliance with “the different Syrian parties leading to a unity government,” which would “comprise some of the existing structures of the regime, the National Coalition and other components which have a moderate vision for Syria.”

In *Le Figaro*, Quilès pointed to the continuing strength of the Assad regime, which “still enjoys significant support, not only with the minorities, especially the Alawites, but also with a majority of Sunnis.”

Quilès painted a devastating picture of the outcome of the NATO proxy war in Syria: “The Western backed Syrian National Coalition seems to be under the influence of the Muslim Brothers. The Free Syrian Army... is divided, in disagreement with the National Coalition and very much weakened militarily.”

He attacked nominal allies Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey for their “tolerant attitude [towards] the Al Nusra Front and even IS ... Today, the fall of Assad without an organised transition would lead to a Libya-type situation, the collapse of the state, chaos, then the destabilisation of Lebanon and doubtless Jordan too.”

Calling for further talks in Geneva and better relations with Syria and Iran, Quilès urged an initiative by France to help shift US policy: “Let’s not wait, because of their needs in relation to their Iran policies, for the US to decide on their own to take a step towards the Syrian regime.” He proposed instead an immediate joint offensive against IS.

He also pointed out that Washington and Paris are already collaborating with Assad. French intelligence services met their counterparts in Syria in 2013 “to obtain necessary intelligence for the fight against terrorism,” and US planes striking at IS positions have been “sharing the skies with Assad’s forces.”

In the spirit of the imperialist adage “We have no permanent allies, only permanent interests,” Mitterrand’s old war minister made clear that France was not abandoning in the longer term the aim of regime change, against Assad in Syria and beyond. “Coming to terms with keeping Assad in power is out of the question, even more with his crimes. But we must carry out a policy which responds to the reality and urgency of the situation, which is alarming,” he said.



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