

Trump pulls plug on CIA's Syrian "revolution"

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The news first reported by the *Washington Post* on July 19—that the Trump administration is winding up a five-year-old, formally covert CIA operation to train, arm and even pay the salaries of Islamist militias in Syria—has further fueled the ferocious political war in Washington over allegations of “collusion” between Trump and Moscow.

Senator John McCain, the Republican chair of the Armed Services Committee, issued a statement from Arizona, where he is recovering from surgery related to brain cancer, that “any concession to Russia, absent a broader strategy for Syria, is irresponsible and short-sighted.”

A more hysterical denunciation came from *Washington Post* columnist and former chief speechwriter for George W. Bush, Michael Gerson, who accused Trump of carrying out a “complete surrender to Russian interests in Syria” and acting “precisely as though he has been bought and sold by a strategic rival” with his “ignoble cutoff of aid to American proxies.”

The claims that cutting off the spigot of arms and money to the so-called “rebels” in Syria represents some kind of a strategic capitulation to Russia are ludicrous. The decision, reportedly taken by Trump together with his national security advisor Gen. H.R. McMaster and CIA Director Mike Pompeo in advance of the G20 summit in Hamburg, was a foregone conclusion.

What used to be referred to as the “Free Syrian Army” has ceased to play any major role in Syria. Syrian government forces, backed by Iranian-aligned militias and, since September 2015, Russian air support, have driven the “rebels” out of every major urban center and into the rural areas of Idlib province, where they have been engaged in bitter internecine

combat against each other.

The government's retaking of eastern Aleppo in December 2016 spelled the final debacle for the US strategy of carrying out a war for regime change using CIA-backed Sunni Islamist militias as Washington's proxies.

This criminal strategy was initiated in the wake of the 2011 US war for regime change that toppled the government of Libya and ended in the lynch-mob murder of its leader, Muammar Gaddafi. Islamist fighters and huge quantities of weapons were funneled from the eastern Libyan port city of Benghazi into Syria.

By 2013, this had turned into what one US official described to the *New York Times* as a “cataract of weaponry,” poured into Syria by the CIA, working with Saudi Arabia and the other right-wing Gulf oil monarchies, together with Turkey. Tens of thousands of Islamist foreign fighters were also funneled in to wage a bloody sectarian civil war, whose victims now number in the hundreds of thousands of dead and millions of displaced refugees. Some of these same elements, whose crossing of international borders was facilitated by Western intelligence agencies, returned to carry out terrorist attacks in Europe.

The CIA claimed to have “vetted” some 40 “moderate rebel” militias deserving of US arms and money. In reality, most of these groups were largely indistinguishable from elements like the Al-Nusra Front, and either ended up in an alliance with this Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate or surrendered their American weapons to it.

The defeat of the CIA-backed “rebels” was a function not merely of the increased firepower supplied by Russia and Iran, but of the hostility toward these militias of broad layers of the Syrian population, which

viewed the Assad regime, despite its repression and corruption, as the lesser evil.

Contrary to the propaganda put out by the US State Department and its pseudo-left apologists, the rebels were not the champions of some struggle for democracy or “revolution,” but rather right-wing sectarian gangsters, who systematically looted the areas under their control and beheaded those who expressed any opposition to their obscurantist ideology.

The ending of the CIA’s arming and funding of the largely spent Al Qaeda-linked “rebels” signals not an end to the conflict in Syria or any significant rapprochement with Moscow, but is rather part of the preparations for a wider war.

The Pentagon is continuing to train and arm its own proxy forces, both the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces—comprised primarily of the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia—in the north, and Sunni militias in the southeast, near the US special forces base established at al-Tanf near a strategic Syrian border crossing with Iraq and Jordan.

This is only one of a string of bases set up by the US military in what amounts to a stealth invasion and occupation of Syria. The Turkish state-run news agency, reflecting the hostility of the regime in Ankara to the US alliance with the Syrian Kurds, published an article pinpointing the location of 10 secret US bases in the north of Syria, along with detailed information about the number of troops and type of weaponry and equipment deployed at each of them. Earlier this month, the Trump administration asked Congress to vote its approval for the building of new “temporary” bases in both Iraq and Syria.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon continues to carry out deadly airstrikes against Syrian targets, with the independent monitoring group Airwars reporting at least 415 civilians killed by US bombs and missiles last month alone. This estimate undoubtedly leaves many of the dead uncounted, and the numbers will rise dramatically as the US escalates its siege of Raqqa.

While the Reuters news agency quoted one US official as saying that the scrapping of the CIA program was a “signal” to Russia that Washington wants to improve ties, the real aim is to drive a wedge between Moscow and Iran in order to better prepare for war against the latter. This is the central purpose of the US military buildup in Syria and Iraq, where Iranian

influence has steadily grown.

Those setting policy in the Trump administration, largely the cabal of retired and active duty generals who hold all the key security posts, see Iran as the principal obstacle to the bloody and protracted US campaign to establish its hegemony over the Middle East and Central Asia. The American military brass is particularly bitter over the fact that Washington’s war of aggression in Iraq served largely to strengthen Iranian influence in the region.

Two days before the report in the *Washington Post* on the ending of aid to the “rebels,” the Trump administration provided formal certification that Iran is in compliance with the nuclear agreement it negotiated with the US and five other powers. The move came only after hours of wrangling in the White House, with Trump agreeing reluctantly to certify only on the basis of a decision to impose a new set of unilateral US sanctions against Tehran that are themselves in violation of the accord and designed to provoke a confrontation.

Washington is also reportedly mounting a campaign to pressure the European powers to toe the US line by adopting a punitive policy toward Tehran. But the other signatories to the agreement—Britain, France, Germany, China and Russia—are all looking to conclude major trade and investment deals in Iran, with the French energy conglomerate Total leading the way with a \$1 billion agreement to develop gas production.

Such tensions with Europe will only fuel Washington’s drive toward a wider war. Faced with the decline of its economic and political global dominance, the parasitic and criminal American ruling class, personified in the figure of Trump, increasingly sees war as the only way out of economic and social crises for which it can offer no progressive solution.

A US war against Iran, a nation of over 77 million people, would eclipse even the bloodbaths carried out by the Pentagon and the CIA in Iraq and Syria, while posing the real threat of a nuclear third world war.



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