Britain’s covert operations to overthrow Syrian government exposed

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The web-based *Middle East Eye* has revealed that the British government secretly funded an online movement—Sarkha—supposedly set up and run by Syria’s Alawite community and targeting the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

A project commissioned by the UK to promote Britain’s strategic interests in Syria and the Middle East, its exposure gives a glimpse of the vast number of such fake news activities carried out by the intelligence arms of the US and European powers and their regional allies in Syria. They constitute, along with Britain’s military strikes, a blatant violation of Syria’s sovereignty, while breaching UK domestic law. The outcry, had Russia, China or Iran been found to be carrying out similar activities in Britain would be deafening.

While the initiatives began in 2012, they took off after August 2013 when the UK parliament decisively rejected Prime Minister David Cameron’s efforts to join the US in a military venture to overthrow the Assad regime.

The revelations also expose the reactionary nature of all those unnamed “revolutionary” forces, whose economic and social programme was never explained, so beloved by the pseudo-left supporters of Western intervention in Syria.

Sarkha (The Cry) was part of a broader covert programme aimed at supporting Islamist forces as proxies to topple Assad in order to weaken Iran and prepare for a US-backed Israeli war against that country.

Claiming to be a grassroots movement from the same Alawite community as President Assad, Sarkha emerged in 2014 to protest against the high casualty rate of Alawite men serving in the Syrian army in the then three-year long war. It urged them to unite with other ethnic and religious communities in Syria, thereby undermining Assad’s support base.

According to official documents seen by *Middle East Eye*, Sarkha was created by an American company under contract to the UK’s Military Strategic Effects, a unit within the Ministry of Defence, later handed over to the cross-government agency, the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF). According to the agency’s website, the CSSF is an important driver in the government’s Fusion Doctrine and “supports and delivers activity to tackle instability and to prevent conflicts that threaten UK interests.”

In February, Ian Cobain and Alice Ross, writing in the *Middle East Eye*, revealed how British contractors, with offices in Istanbul and Amman, recruited a network of Syrian citizen journalists to promote an anti-Assad agenda and build support for the armed opposition, while supposedly rejecting “the violent extremist networks” such as ISIS.

Most of the journalists were unaware that their media office was being run by a British company. Indeed, the government’s own documents acknowledged that the journalists’ lives would be in danger if the source of the funding became known. It also suggests why so many journalists have been targeted, imprisoned or killed as spies by the Syrian regime and by opposition militias.

One of the people involved in the project said if their work were known to be linked in any way with the British government it would have undermined its effectiveness.

Not only was their output circulated in Syria, through what purported to be the press offices of Syrian opposition groups, but their video clips of fighters from “moderate” opposition groups were also distributed to the mainstream international Arabic TV and media outlets.

These citizen journalists’ offices also served to “maintain an effective network of correspondents/stringers inside Syria to report on MAO [moderate armed opposition] activity,” enabling the British government to control the conversations between the UK media and those presenting themselves as representatives of the Syrian opposition. That is, the

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program sought to influence not only reporting within Syria but also in Britain.

Despite their best efforts to depict the Free Syrian Army (FSA) as heroes, these citizen journalists could not disguise the corruption and mismanagement of opposition forces that had Western backing in the early years of the wars.

The Cameron government viewed this and other related projects, costing around $540,000 a month, as a means of maintaining a British presence in Syria until it could participate in a military assault on the country, with its mission statement saying it should have "the capability to expand back into the strategic as and when the opportunity arises, to help build an effective opposition political-military interface."

The British government backed another project which involved the funding and training of police forces (the Free Syria Police) and "civil defence teams" (militias) in rebel-held areas. The scheme, Access to the Justice and Community Security Scheme (Ajacs), was managed by British consultants Adam Smith International (ASI).

This "aid" ended up in the hands of jihadi forces in Syria. The police officers were handpicked by extremists linked to al-Qaeda and were cooperating with courts run by the al-Nusra Front, the al-Qaeda offshoot in Syria, which handed out extreme punishments including summary executions. In one case, police officers even closed the road near Sarmin in December 2014 so that the execution of two women by stoning could take place.

At one point, according to ASI's own report, the police handed over cash, up to 20 percent of their funds at one point, to an extremist group, Nour al-Din al-Zinki, linked to human rights abuses and atrocities including the beheading of a young prisoner in 2016.

The funding for the project, ostensibly aimed at training a civilian police force in rebel-held Aleppo, Idlib and Daraa provinces, was only halted after a BBC Panorama investigation, "Jihadis you pay for," exposed how officers from the force worked with courts carrying out brutal sentences. Early in 2019, the Free Syria Police disbanded, following the takeover of Idlib province by Turkish-backed Islamists.

The British government, along with the US, also set up the White Helmets, ostensibly a civil defence group dedicated to rescuing civilians caught in the fighting in Syria. The leading figure involved in setting up the outfit in 2013 was the former British army officer and MI6 agent James Le Mesurier. He went on to work as a mercenary for Gulf oil monarchies in conjunction with a company linked to the infamous former US military contractor, Blackwater, and after training Syrians in Turkey, sent them back into Syria to function as a logistical support and propaganda arm of the Western-backed "rebels."

Operating principally in zones controlled by the Al Nusra Front, the White Helmets filmed staged rescues in areas hit by bombs dropped by Syrian government and Russian warplanes, passing on the videos to the Western corporate media, which aired them with no questions asked. The White Helmets have been accused of fabricating both attacks and rescues, most infamously in the case of an alleged gas attack in the city of Douma in April 2018.

At the same time parliament was explicitly rejecting any military action against Syria, the government was secretly loaning British pilots to the US, French and Canadian air forces and the Royal Air Force (RAF) was participating in air strikes in Syria as part of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition in Iraq. This only became public knowledge after it had begun, and well before parliament voted in favour of air strikes in Syria in autumn 2015.

In December 2016, the government reported that RAF operations in Syria far outstripped the intensity of the UK's operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. By September 2017, more than 1,000 UK personnel, as well as special operations forces, were involved in operations in Syria, with the RAF having conducted around 900 airstrikes, at a cost of £265 million.

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