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## Washington's Long History in Syria

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As they consider further intervention in Syria, Washington policymakers should be aware of the history of previous U.S. involvement there. During the Cold War's early years, the United States tried to overthrow the Syrian government in one of the most sustained covert-operations campaigns ever conducted.

Lee Kuan Yew has observed that "it is the collective memory of a people, the composite learning from past events which led to successes or disasters that makes a people welcome or fear new events, because they recognize parts in new events which have similarities with past experience." And in a region of the world where memories are long and history matters, past events indicate that overtly arming the Syrian rebels could amount to an even bigger kiss of death.

Things were not always so bad between the United States and Syria. Robert Kaplan's 1995 book *The Arabists* describes an Ottoman-ruled Syria where American Protestant missionaries arrived in 1820, fifteen years before Washington opened a consulate in Aleppo. These missionaries did not succeed in converting many individuals to Christianity, but were nonetheless loved for many other contributions, like the medical treatment they brought to poor remote villages and their 1866 founding of what is now the American University of Beirut (modern Lebanon was then considered part of Syria). In the spirit of the American Revolution, many of these missionaries supported the movement for Arab independence from Ottoman rule. Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points followed suit by calling for "nationalities which are now under Turkish rule [to]

be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development.”

President Wilson later conceded to French control of Syria pursuant to the League of Nations mandate system, but did so against the advice of the King-Crane Commission he appointed to study the matter. Alas, the U.S. Senate thought differently of the League of Nations in part because of the commission’s conclusions. Pro-American sentiments in Syria thus peaked after World War II when the Truman administration thwarted France’s attempts to reestablish its Syrian mandate, enabling Syria to become a fledgling independent democracy in 1946, as well as one of the UN Charter’s original signatories.

Syrian President Shukri al-Quwatli, however, faced difficulties in getting some firebrands in parliament to support passage rights for an Arabian American Oil Company pipeline—on which postwar European recovery depended—from Saudi Arabia’s Dhahran oil fields to the Mediterranean. Like so many leaders in the region, Quwatli did not question the economic benefit to his country. But the pipeline’s opponents in parliament simply could not get over U.S. recognition of the state of Israel. Ignoring more benign options, Truman consequently authorized the CIA’s very first coup, which was to be led by Syrian army chief of staff General Husni al-Za’im.

British filmmaker Adam Curtis pointed out in a post for the BBC that the lone dissenter in this plan appears to have been a young State Department political officer stationed in Damascus, who nonetheless emerged from the resulting ostracism to become a distinguished ambassador. Deane Hinton said of the planned coup: “I want to go on record as saying that this is the stupidest, most irresponsible action a diplomatic mission like ours could get itself involved in, and that we’ve started a series of these things that will never end.”

But Quwatli was overthrown in March 1949 by General Za’im, a man that U.S. officials viewed as a “‘Banana Republic’ dictator type” who “did not have the competence of a French corporal,” but did have a “strong anti-Soviet attitude.” Za’im only lasted until August, when he was killed in another coup, the second of three that year. What followed was a six-year political tug of war with the CIA and U.S. allies like General Adib al-Shishakli on one side and nationalist coalitions including such notables as Hashim al-Atassi on the other. It ended with Quwatli’s 1955 reelection to the Syrian presidency.

Renewed U.S. diplomatic initiatives proved unable to distance Quwatli from the similarly Arab-nationalist and Soviet-leaning government of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt. So in 1956 the Eisenhower administration commenced Operation Straggle, which sought to foment Quwatli’s second collapse via staged border incidents in Turkey, the mobilization of various rural tribes and right-wing Syrian Social Nationalist Party guerillas by U.S. and British operatives, and if necessary, Iraqi military support. But Straggle was delayed while the British government, unbeknownst to the United States, began its unsuccessful attempt with France and Israel to retake the Suez Canal. Indeed, declassified documents indicate that President Eisenhower pushed for the ceasefire ending the Anglo-French-Israeli Suez adventure in part because Syrian counterintelligence had discovered Straggle and consequently sought Soviet military aid.

In August 1957, after U.S. assistance stopped a Syrian and Egyptian-backed coup attempt against King Hussein of Jordan, the Eisenhower administration implemented Operation Wappen, a last-ditch effort to coordinate with dissidents in the Syrian military and reinstall former president Shishakli. Syria not only infiltrated this operation and broke diplomatic relations with the United States, but also entered into its ill-fated 1958-61 United Arab Republic union with Egypt. Additionally, Syria colluded with Egypt in supporting restive Muslim groups during the 1958 Lebanon Crisis and backing Iraq's 14 July Revolution, when Iraqi General Abd al-Karim Qasim overthrew Iraq's U.S.-backed monarchy. (The Qasim government would lead the United States to actions with consequences still evident today—covert U.S. cultivation of Iraq's Ba'ath Party, which took power in a February 1963 coup led by General Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, the cousin of a rising young political star named Saddam Hussein.)

Excellent accounts of these events are provided by a 1990 article in the *Middle East Journal* by Clark University history professor Douglas Little (an excerpt of which is available here) and Syrian historian Sami Moubayed. So perhaps one can understand why even an unclassified U.S. government report last year pointed out a “consensus narrative” that was “widely held throughout the Syrian population.” It suggested perceptions of “foreign conspiracies” having sought to undermine Syria in the past, as well as how “association with the United States . . . may delegitimize aid or humanitarian efforts.” President Eisenhower, in 1958, thus observed: “The trouble is that we have a campaign of hatred against us, not by the governments but by the people . . .”

Is history repeating itself? Sadly, one can already make a case that the United States is complicit in fueling an insurgency that coalition partners, at least, have enabled Al Qaeda-linked militants to take over. The tragic sectarianism that has resulted belies episodes of Syrian national unity in the face of foreign adversity, such as the Alawite-led Syrian Revolt of 1919 and the Druze-led 1925-27 Great Syrian Revolt against the post-World War I French mandate. Moreover, the Alawite Hafez al-Assad rose to power in a Sunni-governed country with a constitution that did not establish Islam as the state religion and merely required that Syria's president be Muslim. Those provisions, which reflect a commitment to freedom of religion (albeit a commitment consistent with “public order”), remain in force today, supplemented only by an establishment of Islamic jurisprudence as but one source of legislation.

Assad's Ba'ath Party was founded by Alawite Zaki al-Arsuzi, Eastern Orthodox Christian Michel Aflaq and Sunni schoolteacher Salah al-Din al-Bitar [30], reflecting the secular political scene that allowed for a communist party whose influence the United States feared to become prominent. And notwithstanding the debate concerning Islam's teachings about the status of women, they have been allowed to vote in Syria since 1949. A woman—Najah al-Attar—is technically third in the line of Syrian presidential succession today.

Yes, Assad is a brutal dictator who flirted with Al Qaeda during the Iraq war and is supported by elements responsible for, among other things, the 1983 Beirut Marine barracks bombing. But how can the U.S. message to Syria have any credibility when Washington was once perfectly willing to render terrorist suspects to Assad's dungeons, including one man—Maher Arar—who turned out to be innocent? U.S. pressure on the Assad regime only began afterwards.

Reports indicate too much Al Qaeda-related influence among the Syrian rebels for comfort and the possibility that a rebel victory will give Al Qaeda, supposedly on the verge of defeat, its best-located base ever.

The Obama administration should thus allow the Syrian civil war to run its course, if only to avoid making the lives of well-meaning Syrians, free of opportunism and extremism—who wanted nothing more than a better future for their country, and who were still encouraged by the U.S. “democracy project”—even worse. Maybe the administration might even reconsider the project itself, which has, at best, brought this great nation to the brink of permanent fiscal and strategic insolvency.