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## The War Against the Assad Regime Is Not a ‘Pipeline War’

By Gareth Porter  
September 23, 2016

The reason put forward by the Obama administration for the war against the Bashar al-Assad regime – saving the Syrian people from suffering and death at the hands of Assad – has no credibility with anyone familiar with the record of US interventions for regime change around the world.

As has been the case with all the other wars the US has fought over the decades, opponents of the US war state have had to come up with their own explanations for the sponsorship of a sectarian bloodbath in Syria. The explanation that is rapidly gaining popularity is that the war in Syria is a “pipeline war,” fought to ensure that the natural gas from Qatar would go to Europe through Syria and would weaken Europe’s dependence on Russia for its energy.

That argument has been made in a number of places over the last few years, but the most widely republished version is an essay by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. in Politico, arguing that the Obama administration began to lay the groundwork for overthrowing the Assad regime in 2009 after Syrian President Bashar al-Assad rejected a pipeline proposed by Qatar. That planned pipeline agreed to by Qatar and Turkey, Kennedy argues, would have linked Qatar’s natural gas to European markets through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Turkey, so it would have deprived Russia of Europe’s dependence on its natural gas.

But Assad not only prevented the realization of the Qatari plan but signed up with Iran for an alternative pipeline that would make Iran, not Qatar, the principal Middle East supplier of natural gas to European energy markets, according to the “pipeline war” account, so the Obama administration decided that Assad had to be removed from power.

It’s easy to understand why that explanation would be accepted by many antiwar activists: it is in line with the widely accepted theory that all the US wars in the Middle East have been “oil wars” – about getting control of the petroleum resources of the region and denying them to America’s enemies.

But the “pipeline war” theory is based on false history and it represents a distraction from the real problem of US policy in the Middle East – the US war state’s determination to hold onto its military posture in the region.

It is true that Qatar had proposed a pipeline to carry its natural gas to Turkey. But nearly everything else about the story turns out, upon investigation, to be untrue. There is no contemporaneous report of any such rejection by the Syrian government. It was only four years later, in August 2013 that an Agence France-Presse article recounting what happened in a meeting between President Vladimir Putin and Saudi intelligence chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan, claimed in passing, “In 2009, Assad refused to sign an agreement with Qatar for an overland pipeline running from the Gulf to Europe via Syria to protect the interests of its Russian ally, which is Europe’s top supplier of natural gas.” No source is given for the statement, but the main source for other information in the article was “a European diplomat who shuttles between Beirut and Damascus.”

That claim has no credibility for a very simple reason: there was no Qatari proposal for Syria to reject in 2009. It was not until October 2009 that Qatar and Turkey even agreed to form a working group to develop such a gas pipeline project.

Even more important, the immediate problem for Qatar’s proposal was not Syria but Saudi Arabia, whose territory the Qatari gas would have to cross to get to Syria. In January 2010, The National, a daily UAE [United Arab Emirates] newspaper reported that the main obstacle to the idea of a pipeline to carry Qatari natural gas to Turkey and then to Europe “was likely to be Saudi Arabia, which has a track record of obstructing regional pipeline development” and still had very bad relations with Qatar. And Middle East geopolitical analyst Felix Monti reported at Oilprice.com in 2012 that Qatar had been forced to abandon the pipeline idea in 2010 because Saudi Arabia had not agreed to have it built across its territory.

So where did the idea that the Obama administration responded to Assad’s alleged rejection by shifting to covert regime change policy come from? Kennedy’s article asserts, “In 2009, according to WikiLeaks, soon after Bashar Assad rejected the Qatar pipeline, the CIA began funding opposition groups in Syria.”

But the article links to a Washington Post news report on the WikiLeaks cables on Syria that doesn’t support that charge at all. According to the Post report, the cables show that a London-based satellite channel called Barada TV, supported by the State Department, “began

broadcasting in April 2009.” But they also show, according to the Post report, that the State Department had “funneled as much as \$6 million to the group since 2006 to operate the satellite channel and finance other activities inside Syria.”

So the US funding for opposition groups in Syria aimed at exploiting the regime’s “vulnerabilities” had begun under the Bush administration years before any supposed Syrian rejection of the Qatari pipeline proposal. The WikiLeaks documents thus contradict the alleged connection between the pipeline deal and a change in US policy toward Syria. Moreover, despite the reference to Saudi and Israeli intelligence reports that WikiLeaks has obtained, no story has been published based on those leaked documents that supports the “pipeline war” thesis.

Furthermore, the pipeline theory ignores the fact that the proposed Qatar-to-Turkey pipeline was always contingent on being able to link up with a larger proposed pipeline – the so-called “Nabucco” pipeline going through Turkey that was designed by the EU to reduce European dependence on Russian gas. But as The Guardian reported in July 2009, the Nabucco pipeline project “has been mired in disputes and difficulties for two years, raising doubts about its viability.”

For one thing, it was never clear where the supply of gas would come from. But what reduced its prospects even further was the fact that the European financial and economic slowdown of 2008-09 had caused natural gas prices to decline for the first time ever, and there was no upturn in sight by mid-2010. And gas prices in Central and Eastern Europe, the intended market for the gas, were significantly lower than those in Italy and Greece, which were the target markets for a competing pipeline plan. That caused potential sources of finance to back away from the Nabucco project.

The Shah Deniz consortium, which represented the suppliers of gas from Azerbaijan’s Shah Deniz gas field, was to make the ultimate decision on which plan for the pipeline from the Middle East to Europe would be chosen. And at a Black Sea Energy Conference in Istanbul in mid-November 2011 the Azeri gas consortium announced that its gas would be transported to Italy and Greece using a much shorter pipeline than had been envisioned by the Nabucco proposal.

So, long before Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, with the assistance of the CIA, began shipping weapons to anti-regime armed groups in Syria in late 2011, the Obama administration could not have been thinking of regime change in Syria to save a Syria-Turkey pipeline for Qatari gas. They all knew perfectly well that there was no longer any possibility of such a Qatar-to-Turkey pipeline.

If it’s not a pipeline war, why is the US intervening in Syria? The US decision to support Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia in their ill-conceived plan to overthrow the Assad regime was primarily a function of the primordial interest of the US permanent war state in its regional alliances. The three Sunni allies control US access to the key US military bases in the region, and the Pentagon, the CIA, the State Department and the Obama White House were all concerned, above all, with protecting the existing arrangements for the US military posture in the region.

After all, those military bases are what allow the United States to play at the role of hegemonic power in the Middle East, despite the disasters that have accompanied that role. The degree to which the US determination to preserve its present military profile in the region is illustrated by the case of US-Qatar relations over that tiny monarchy's arming of extremist Sunni groups in Syria in 2012. The Obama administration was very unhappy with Qatar's choice of proxies in Syria, and the National Security Council discussed a proposal to pull a squadron of US fighter planes from Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar as a way of putting pressure on the government over the issue, according to a story in the Wall Street Journal.

But the US Central Command (CENTCOM), which had moved its headquarters to Al Udeid in 2003, argued that the base was critical to its operations in the region, and that it was about to renegotiate its agreement with Qatar over the use of it. The Pentagon supported CENTCOM's opposition to any move that would disturb relations with Qatar over the issue and vetoed any such pressure on Qatar. The administration ended up doing nothing about the issue, and in 2013, the US-Qatar Defense Cooperation Agreement originally reached in 2003 was renewed for another ten years.

The massive, direct and immediate power interests of the US war state – not the determination to ensure that a pipeline would carry Qatar's natural gas to Europe – drove the US policy of participation in the war against the Syrian regime. Only if activists focus on that reality will they be able to unite effectively to oppose not only the Syrian adventure but the war system itself.