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U.S. secretly backed Syrian opposition: report

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The State Department has secretly funded Syrian opposition groups, according to diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks, The Washington Post reported on Monday.

The cables show that the State Department has funneled as much as \$6 million since 2006 to a group of Syrian exiles to operate a London-based satellite channel, Barada TV, and finance activities inside Syria, the Post said.

Barada TV began broadcasting in April 2009 but has ramped up operations to cover the mass protests in Syria that began last month as part of a long-standing campaign to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad the Post said.

The U.S. money for Syrian opposition figures began flowing under President George W. Bush after political ties with Damascus were frozen in 2005, the newspaper said.

The financial backing has continued under President Barack Obama, even as his administration sought to rebuild relations with Assad, the Post said. In January, the White House posted an ambassador to Damascus for the first time in six years.

The article said it is unclear whether the United States was still funding Syrian opposition groups, but the cables indicate money was set aside at least through September 2010.

An uprising against Assad's authoritarian rule have spread across large parts of the country. Rights groups put the death toll at more than 200 people. Syrian authorities blame the violence on armed gangs.

The previously undisclosed cables show that U.S. Embassy officials in Damascus became worried in 2009 when they learned that Syrian intelligence agents were raising questions about U.S. programs, The Washington Post said.

An April 2009 cable signed by the top-ranking U.S. diplomat in Damascus at the time read Syrian authorities "would undoubtedly view any U.S. funds going to illegal political groups as tantamount to supporting regime change," the Post reported.

"A reassessment of current U.S.-sponsored programing that supports anti- factions, both inside and outside Syria, may prove productive," the cable said.

The Post said the State Department declined to comment on the authenticity of the cables or answer questions about its funding of Barada TV.