

Why Is The U.S. Determined To Remove Assad? Syria Expert Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi Explains

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Glenn Greenwald (GG): Ultimately, the overarching question that I have is this one, which is – and again, I want to just look at it from, for the moment, a United States perspective. Even though President Obama did authorize the CIA program that proved unsuccessful to remove Assad, he was widely criticized by both parties in Washington, even by Hillary Clinton, who was the Secretary of State, for kind of restraining the CIA, for not letting them really do the sorts of things they felt like they could have done to remove Assad. And ultimately Obama came to view the Assad government and the Russian government as potential partners in the region when it came to, as I said, jointly targeting al-Qaeda and ISIS organizations that were in Syria, that instead of looking at al-Qaeda and ISIS as our common allies against Assad, it made more sense, I think Obama concluded, to look at Russia and Syria as our allies against the common enemies with these terrorist organizations. And then Donald Trump came along and sort of made that more explicit by saying why is it in the United States' interest to remove the government of Bashar al-Assad? I'd rather work with Assad and the Assad government in bombing our common enemies, which is ISIS and these terrorist organizations, and you have Donald Trump and Barack Obama more or less coming to the same conclusion about why the United States maybe not only can live with the Assad regime, but why it would be better and more in the US interest to have the Assad regime there than the alternative. So why is it that despite that rationale, despite that recognition that came from Obama through Trump, there continues to be this lingering view, apparently, and not just the West, but the United States, that it is an important strategic goal to destroy the government of Bashar al-Assad even though we may not know who might replace it. What is the strategic interest there for the people who still want that?

Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi (AJT): I mean, it does all ultimately go back to the late 2011, 2012 when the US took this stance and said that Assad must go. And then they committed to that, and then initially I think there was this expectation that perhaps really the insurgency could do that by itself. There was, after all, a widespread expectation that the government could collapse by the end of 2012, and I heard that from a lot of people at the time, including

actually Iraq's national security adviser to Prime Minister Nouri al -Maliki, the former adviser, that is, at the time. But that didn't happen, and you did, of course, see the Iranians and Hezbollah initially leading the intervention to prop up and support the Syrian government. And I think that there was a recognition really that a military intervention – I mean, the ones who were more hardline on it, I think they had some, I think in supposition it was correct that to actually really overthrow it you would have to go all the way in and overthrow the government militarily. And then, of course, that obviously raises the question of what would you do after that? And it becomes a philosophy, an issue of, well, you broke it, so you own it. Right? So this is actually why I think then Obama settled on this calibrated pressure strategy, which was to give support to these CIA vetted groups, put pressure on the government, and hopefully at some point it will, the government will feel the pressure enough to come to the table and negotiate this political transition. I think, by the way, that was also partly based out of the Libya experience, where you had the overthrow of Pahlavi and you had, you know, this anarchy, and today, even today, the splitting of Libya into two rival governments, right?

GG: And Iraq as well, where, you know, removing the Saddam Hussein regime was not that difficult, but what came afterwards was.

AJT: Oh, no, I fully agree with that. Yeah, the Iraq experience, I think, also informed Obama's calculation. That's fair, and thank you for raising that. So, yeah, the calibrated pressure strategy, though, I think was mistaken, because as you say, when the insurgency made major gains in 2015, like taking over at the province, it did not prompt the government to say okay, let's go to the table, to actually get the Russians to intervene. And at the same time, of course, with US policy, you had this issue that the Islamic State had taken over much of the east of the country, and much of the north of it as well. And that meant that, you know, there was this counter-IS focus – counter-IS became a very big focus of US policy, and hence this relationship they established with the Kurdish-led People's Protection Units, the link to the BKK, and then the US helped rebrand as the Syrian Democratic Forces, even though its approach to governance is actually very much a one-faction, hegemonic, authoritarian rule. Actually, not very different from the Tahrir al-Sham approach of one-faction, hegemonic, authoritarian rule, albeit with more of a twist to it.

So, yeah, US policy is still very much based on this idea that we keep the consensus blob-view, as you might call it. It has been very much based on we keep up this partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces, we continue to put pressure on the Syrian government to, principally through economic sanctions, which have very much helped isolate the country and damage the value of its currency, and hopefully we can use that as leverage to either to make them agree outright to a political transition, or as it actually came out quite recently in media leaks that apparently the US and the United Arab Emirates have been discussing to lift some of the US sanctions on Syria in the hope that Assad would perhaps in turn distance himself from Iran. This, by the way, these talks, they were going on allegedly before this insurgent offensive took place, just for context.

GG: Right, so, I just want to return, though, to that question, which I guess was most vividly and explicitly articulated by Donald Trump, certainly during the 2016 campaign, which was: why is it in the interest of the United States to change the government of Iraq? If you go and look back at those early parts of the Bush-Cheney War on Terror, they partnered with Assad in a lot of different ways in what they were calling the prosecution of the war on terror, including sending all sorts of terrorist suspects to Syria to be interrogated with torture. That was one of the places we loved to send people that we were rendering and picking up and kidnapping – to Syria. The United States government had a relationship with Syria, didn't really like the fact that the Syrians were, quote, unquote, interfering in Iraq, even though the United States was sort of interfering in Iraq as well, but that was the language. So I understand that there was some tension, but when you look at the Syrian government, which obviously is not a government of Islamic extremism, quite the contrary, is hostile to Islamic extremism, which is why you see these Islamic extremist groups fighting to dislodge Assad, what is it about the Assad regime that makes so many people in the United States perceive it to be in the American interest to remove it? Is it just the fact that they're an ally of Iran and removing Assad would weaken Iran despite what might come after that? Or are there other reasons why so many people in the West seem to think that removing Assad is an important goal?

AJT: When I see people complain morally about the government, I can understand that if you're actually consistent in your moral beliefs, I mean, if you certainly oppose, say, repressive security apparatuses of other governments in the region, and you're actually consistent about that, then –

GG: But let's just quickly dispense with that, given how happy the United States is with governments like Saudi Arabia and Egypt. So, you know, I think you understand that that's not the reason.

AJT: No, no, no, no. I agree that fundamentally the reason why there tends to be policy consensus against government is precisely because it is seen as this important ally, when it is, to be fair, an important ally of Iran and the broader, what you might call the resistance axis, principally in acting as a conduit and logistics artery for supply of weapons to Hezbollah. And, you know, of course, ultimately, a lot of the issue about designation of terrorist groups is groups we don't like. So that's why Hezbollah gets designated as a terrorist group, because the United States doesn't like what it does in fighting against Israel in the past and now. So, yeah, it's fundamentally a geopolitical thing rather than actually consistent moral principle.

GG: So Jeffrey Sachs, who's a long time leading economist for the United States and has participated in economic rescues in many parts of the world and has now become integrated as well into a lot of the foreign policy apparatus, has become a very, very, very vocal critic of US policy in the Middle East, he regards the US-supported war by Israel in Gaza to be a genocide. As a result, he's been removed very, very quickly from a lot of the mainstream media platforms to which he used to have access. But he was on Piers Morgan's show for the second time. I think Piers Morgan put him on for the first time a couple of months ago. And

Piers Morgan, as long as it produces enough controversy that people pay attention, will keep putting you on. And he was on, I think, yesterday, maybe today, to talk about what exactly was happening in Syria. And Jeffrey Sachs' theory about why it's become so important to remove Assad is that if you go back to the mid-1990s with Netanyahu's book and the emergence of neoconservatism and its modern expression in the United States with Bill Kristol and Robert Kagan and the Project for a New American Century, they had this list of countries where regime change was crucial, both for the Israeli perspective and, I guess, as a secondary thought for the American perspective. And you go down that list, and as we know, every single one of those countries has been the subject of regime change operations, including Libya and Lebanon and, obviously, Iraq and Syria. And the one left on the list that still hasn't really been undermined yet is the big prize of Netanyahu that he's trying to lure the United States into, which is Iran. And so his theory was that this is essentially nothing more than the United States acting in servitude to Israeli interests who have an interest in, for example, as you said, weakening Iran, undermining the provision of weapons from Iran to Hezbollah that takes place through Syria and with the consent and cooperation of Syria. Hezbollah is a force in the Middle East that targets Israel, that does not really target the United States. Is it an overstatement or is there, in essence, some truth to it that this is really about Israeli interests wanting to remove Assad more so than making sense from the perspective of American interests to the extent those can be separated?

AJT: I do actually think that's overstated. Why? Because if you look at Israel and its approach to Syria in the war, it's actually been a bit more complicated than just one regime change. Actually, within the – look at the Israeli discourse, I mean, there were certain voices who were quite prominent within policy and security circles within Israel, like Ehud Yaari. They were critical of Israel's approach because they felt it wasn't actually supportive enough of the insurgency and wasn't anti-Assad enough to actually try to overthrow the government. And to be fair, Israel's approach on the broad question of a central government in Syria is that, yeah, Assad sucks from their perspective because he has served as this conduit to support Hezbollah. But they felt that in the decades before the war broke out, you know, the border of the occupied Golan Heights was fairly quiet. And they liked the idea – they thought in general that the Israel policy consensus was that if it's a choice between having a central government or just complete anarchy, we'll rather have a central government. So therefore, Assad can stay barring any viable alternative to him. But at the same time, they wanted this country to be kept weak and divided. They wanted to support – they had this policy of what they call a buffer zone along their borders – supposedly to prevent Iran and Hezbollah from getting to the border of the Golan Heights. They at the same time made a commitment to the Druze minority in Israel that there was a certain village on the other side of the Golan border that they wouldn't let it fall to the insurgents out of some kind of commitment because of Druzians serving in the IDF, for example. So Israel's policy also was this melange of different inclinations, and it didn't actually go all the way to, yeah, let's go and support an army, a rebel army, to go march on Damascus and give it air support.

On the contrary, in 2018, when the Syrian government and Russians took over the south again, they weren't invested enough in the insurgents to actually make some forceful stand for

them. So I agree that fundamentally the US opposition to Syria is a matter of geopolitics because of the resistance axis and the Iran angle. But it's not quite, though, that Israel wants to remove Assad because Israel wants that because, in fact, Israel's approach is a lot more complicated than that. So I hope that's an interesting nuance to the debate.

GG: Yeah, no, I mean, I'm a big fan of Professor Sachs. I was surprised, though, at how almost single-minded his perspective was about what was taking place in Syria, particularly with his insistence that at the core of everything was Netanyahu and almost nothing else, and everything kind of flowed from that.

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