

Aid to Anti-Assad Forces Became the Most Expensive US Covert Action

DR. DAVID S. SORENSON

INTERVIEW BY NUÑO RODRÍGUEZ

Introduction

In December 2019, political scientist Mr. Nuño Rodríguez, founder and director of the *Quixote Globe*, interviewed Dr. David S. Sorenson, professor of international security studies at the US Air War College (AWC). Dr. Sorenson received his PhD from the University of Denver and has served on the faculties of the University of Colorado at Denver, Denison University, and the Mershon Center at The Ohio State University before joining AWC. Dr. Sorenson has served as chair of the International Security Studies Section of the International Studies Association and chair of the International Security and Arms Control Section of the American Political Science Association. He has written numerous books on defense policy, military aviation, and Middle Eastern affairs.

Interview

Rodríguez: Dear Dr. Sorenson, thank you very much for attending our interview. It is an honor to have your knowledge and experience in *Quixote Globe*. We would like to discuss with you the situation of the conflict in Syria from various angles. Since World War II, the United States has had a special interest in Syria. What was that interest based on?

Sorenson: Since 1946, American policy in the Middle East generally and on Syria in particular focused on limiting Soviet expansion. The US saw Iran and Turkey as most threatened by Soviet forces, as the Soviets were mobilizing troops on Iran's border, and the USSR was demanding concessions from Turkey on access to the Mediterranean, including the building of Soviet bases on the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. Believing that colonialism was a key factor in allowing the Soviets to expand into former colonial countries, Pres. [Harry] Truman endorsed Syrian independence and opposed France's efforts to reinstall the League of Nations mandate on Syria. Once containment became global after the implementation of NSC-68, Syria, as a developing country, became important to the United States, as it has borders right below the borders of Turkey and Iran, which in turn border the former Soviet Union. The "domino theory" implied that once the

dominos next to the USSR fell, they would continue to fall, and thus if Turkey and Iran fell to the Soviets, Syria would be next.

There was also concern that early nationalist movements in countries like Syria were vulnerable to penetration by communist forces in those countries. Thus, there were American efforts to install or change regimes based on a sense of their vulnerability to or preference for communism.

Rodríguez: Different US administrations have planned and tried to execute actions to redirect Syrian politics, such as CIA Operations Straggle and Wappen. What dangers did Syrian policies pose to the United States?

Sorenson: Before Straggle and Wappen, the CIA supported the overthrow of Shukri al-Quwatli [the first president of independent Syria] in May 1949, based on Quwatli's refusal to sign a pact with Israel, but also because he refused to allow an oil pipeline from Saudi Arabia to Lebanon to run through Syria (which reflected the existing tensions between the Gulf monarchies and the other Arab republics). Husni al-Zaim replaced Quwatli in a bloodless coup, though the US effort backfired when Quwatli returned to power shortly and shifted his preference to the Soviet Union and Nasserist Egypt. A second coup attempt failed. Fearful of the advance of communism in Syria (as the US frequently confused communism with nationalism), the CIA organized Operations Straggle and Wappen in 1956–1957, though both failed (partly because the first was to occur during the 1956 Suez War, where the US supported Egypt). To the question, these coup support efforts were consistent with the prevalent American belief that the spread of communism globally by the Soviet Union (and in Asia by the People's Republic of China) was a menace to the United States. US Syrian policies of the time also showed the extent that the United States was willing to use disguised coup support to topple governments that the US believed to be pro-Marxist. In the end, almost all of these CIA coup policies failed, and the United States moved away from them, in favor of more traditional instruments of power.

Rodríguez: To what extent have Syria's hostile relations with Israel influenced American policies?

Sorenson: Pres. [Dwight] Eisenhower was hesitant to support Israel, particularly after the 1956 Suez War; so, it fell to Pres. [John] Kennedy to voice support for Israel based on its perceived value in containing Syria. Kennedy supplied Israel with American air defense systems in response to Syria getting Soviet aircraft, but Kennedy also tried unsuccessfully to limit Israel's nuclear weapons program, which he feared would escalate regional tensions and give the Soviets an advantage in Syria. Pres. Lyndon Johnson was more favorably disposed toward Israel

and increased American military and economic assistance to it after the 1967 war, though Johnson was also concerned that Israeli occupation of Golan would spur Syria to take action to take it back (he was correct). [Pres. Richard] Nixon, under Secretary of State [Henry] Kissinger's influence, took a more balanced approach to Israel and Syria, believing that he could reduce the Syrian threat to Israel by improving US–Syrian relations and détente with the USSR. Subsequent US administrations built on that process and emphasized a balance between Israel and its Arab neighbors, and as Syria cut its ties to the former USSR, its perceived danger to Israel lessened. As Syria faded as a regional threat, with its forces evicted from Lebanon after the Rafiq Hariri assassination, the United States shifted its Israeli security focus from Syria to Lebanon and its Iranian-linked militia, Hezbollah, and Iran itself.

Rodríguez: The Syrian conflict came about somewhat unexpectedly; what were the domestic politics that triggered an armed struggle with multiple actors on the ground? Why did the Islamic State choose Syria as a field of operations, being Syria was one of the most stable countries in the region?

Sorenson: The Syrian Civil War of 2011–present opened the door for the Islamic State, or ISIS. It started when Bashar al-Assad turned loose the jihadi arrested after the abortive Hama uprising in 1982, sending them to Iraq in 2003 to counter the Americans. As the Syrian Civil War created vast ungoverned spaces after its March 2011 initiation, some of the Syrian jihadists who had joined ISIS in Iraq returned to Syria. They returned partly because they were originally Syrians and had family and clan connections in Syria. The other reason was because the Syrian town of al-Dabiq is the site of a prophecy, allegedly by the Prophet Mohammed, that the final battle between Islam and the “Romans” (literally the Christian West) would begin at al-Dabiq. ISIS propaganda often featured al-Dabiq. ISIS also used Syria to fill its coffers with loot, taking Syrian oil, Syrian antiquities, and the contents of Syrian banks to fund its operations. It was relatively easy for ISIS to loot Syria, given the lack of security in the areas impacted by the civil war.

Rodríguez: From the beginning, the United States has seen the al-Assad regime as the main culprit of the situation and has made repeated denunciations of its government. What factors are similar from al-Assad and terrorist groups according to the United States? Why does the United States believe that both need to be fought?

Sorenson: The first concern with the Hafiz al-Assad regime was its Ba'ath Socialist ideology, which some in the United States confused with proto-Marxism. The other concern was Assad's relationship with the former USSR, which supplied

Assad with weapons and training. Cold War thinking persisted in the United States about the USSR using proxy forces like Syria to advance its own interests. The other concern was Assad's position against Israel, and the gains Syria briefly made in the 1973 war only reinforced the US belief that Assad wanted to eliminate Israel (it is much more likely that Assad wanted to gain back Syrian territory lost in 1967). Yet the United States distinguished Assad from Middle East terrorist groups by showing a willingness to negotiate with him a year after the 1973 war, as the United States managed to get Israel to withdraw from a strip of land on Golan, allowing the creation of a disengagement zone patrolled by the UN. Official US policy is to never negotiate with terrorist groups (though there have been exceptions), thus, the US willingness to negotiate with Assad showed that America was making a distinction between Syria and terrorist groups.

Rodríguez: What logistic support has the United States yielded to the armed opposition to al-Assad?

Sorenson: The United States delayed providing support to the anti-Assad forces for a while, trying to determine exactly who they were. Concerned that the jihadi Sunni Muslims led the opposition, the Obama administration tried to locate secular forces and settled on the Free Syrian Army and its affiliates. The problem was that the Free Syrian Army, founded in 2011 mostly by Syrian army deserters, fragmented into numerous groups with conflicting goals. While some subgroups had no particular ideology, others had Sunni Salafist leanings; thus, the Obama administration was reluctant to support them. Yet the CIA began to support certain opposition groups in early 2013, though it is not clear how carefully the agency vetted each group. The supplies included small arms, training, and money paid to commanders. By 2015, aid to anti-Assad forces became the most expensive US covert action program in history, topping 1 billion USD. However, some of the funds and arms wound up in the hands of violent extremists, while some of the troops with the units funded by the United States defected to other groups, taking their arms with them. After the rise of ISIS in June 2014, more US aid went to groups professing to be anti-ISIS, but some of these groups had violent jihadi orientations. It was also the case that the anti-Assad groups were disorganized, had no unified strategy, and sometimes wound up fighting each other. Finally, in June 2017, Pres. [Donald] Trump cut off aid to anti-Assad groups, a move that drew criticism from some of his allies, including Senators [John] and [Lindsey] Graham.

Rodríguez: As the conflict inside Syria was radicalized, more regional actors were taking part in the war. What has made Syria a turning point for the regional policy of Turkey, Iran, Israel, and Iraq?

Sorenson: There are several reasons for these turning points. The first is that Assad received support from Iran and Hezbollah, giving Shi'a groups a significant foothold in the Levant. This factor drew Israel and other Arab countries into an uneasy pact, as these countries had mutual interests in curbing Iranian influence in the eastern Mediterranean. Therefore, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries increased their support for Sunni opposition groups, which only fueled Iran and Hezbollah to increase support to Assad. Turkey also increased its support to anti-Assad groups, though its support was conditioned. Turkey feared that Syrian Kurdish opposition groups would gain autonomy in Syria, and thus Turkey sent some funding to Syrian opposition groups that were both anti-Assad and anti-Kurdish. Some of these groups were extreme jihadi groups, who affiliated with al-Qaeda-linked organizations. Russia also entered the Syrian Civil War on Assad's side, causing concerns across the region. While the benefits to Russia are limited, given the weakness of the Assad regime and the destruction in Syria, the neighboring countries are concerned that Russia will establish a base of influence in the broader Middle East. Both Turkey and Israel have tried to establish working relationships with Russia, now that its Middle East role has increased. Israel prevailed on Putin to get Iran to move its forces at least 70 km from the Israeli-Syrian border after Iranian units fired artillery and rockets into Israel. Turkey and Russia have tried to deconflict their regional aspirations, though they remain mutually suspicious due to long historical differences. Israel and the GCC countries (except Qatar) have repaired relations, out of mutual concern for the growing Russian and Iranian presence in Syria.

Rodríguez: What are the reasons for this to be a turning point in international politics?

Sorenson: Prior to the Syrian Civil War, international cooperation and the liberal international order were the prevailing mode of international relations, despite the persistence of conflict globally. The internationalization of the Syrian conflict raised real doubts about the validity of the previous international order, and in some ways pushed the region back to an order based more on realism. Mediation by both countries and international/regional organizations failed to find a solution for the Syrian Civil War, and the rise of ISIS during that war only increased the tilt toward realism. Great-power rivalry was increasing despite the events in Syria and beyond, but the Syrian Civil War gave Russia new opportunities, as Russia has positive, if tenuous relations, with Iran, most Arab states, Turkey, and Israel. Russia has no domestic barriers to expansion beyond its laggard economy, while the American public is tiring of two long wars that have cost close to 2 trillion USD just in direct costs. The pressure is to downgrade the importance of

the Middle East for the United States, and thus allowing Russia, as a great power, to expand its influence.

Rodríguez: To fight against the Islamic State, the United States sent troops into Syria. How has this impacted relations with the Syrian authorities?

Sorenson: The United States largely ignored the Syrian authorities and put troops mostly into northern Syria to support the Syrian Democratic Forces (mostly Kurdish) against ISIS. This is partly because the United States recognized that the Syrian government does not have control of the area where US troops have been deployed. There may have been informal contacts with officials in the Syrian government, but only informal.



(U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Jodi Eastham)

Figure 1. Continued partnership. In developments since Dr. Sorenson's interview, US forces have remained in Syria. Soldiers of Bravo Company, 3rd Infantry Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division conduct a patrol in northeast Syria, 30 January 2020. These patrols help maintain security and stability in the region as well as build community support. The Coalition and our Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) partners remain committed to increasing security in northeast Syria, to enable humanitarian assistance, reconstruction, and stability operations. Terrorist organizations use ungoverned spaces as safe havens. The more stability that exists in a region, the less opportunities for terrorism to thrive.

Rodríguez: What are Washington's relations with the opposition forces, such as the Kurds or the different anti-government militias?

Sorenson: The United States has had a mixed record with the anti-government militias. It has supported a few, like the Free Syrian Army, and, more recently, the Syrian Democratic Forces. The reality for the United States is that there are hundreds of these militias, and they frequently evolve and morph into something that they were not originally. No militia or coalition of militias is strong enough to seriously threaten the Assad regime, with its Russian and Iranian support. So the

United States changed from supporting anti-regime militias to supporting anti-ISIS militias in Syria. That was the reason for supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces as they were using Syrian territory to fight both ISIS and Assad. The challenge was that the Syrian Democratic Forces, which are largely Kurdish, also have ties to the Kurdish PKK, and this is why Turkish Pres. [Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan demanded that the United States withdraw the American troops between Turkey and the Syrian Democratic Forces. The withdrawal signaled what has been largely obvious, that the Obama administration never relied all that much on militias to overthrow Assad, and Trump has completed the residual American commitment to ending the Assad government.

Rodríguez: What have been the main differences between the policies of Obama administration, which entered the conflict, and the Trump administration, which seems primed to exit?

Sorenson: The difference, on the one hand, was not that much, as both administrations did not want to make a major American commitment to ousting the Assad government. Obama did lend support to a few militias, but the results were largely disappointing. Obama did try a different technique when Assad used chemical weapons, diplomacy; whereas, Trump used limited military attacks to the two large chemical weapons attacks that happened during his administration.

Rodríguez: Does Trump's exit from Syria represent a game-changer in the US geopolitics or is it a strategy change within the same game?

Sorenson: I would argue it was a game-changer. The United States has rested its security on forward presence and forward engagement since World War II. So, while it was a minor decision to withdraw American forces from Syria, it was seen widely as a signal that the United States under Trump was withdrawing from its larger global role. The US Syrian withdrawal came as Trump questioned American alliances in both the Pacific and NATO. It came as Trump appeared to downplay the European threat posed by Russia under [Pres. Vladimir] Putin. It came as Trump talked openly about withdrawing residual American forces from Afghanistan and Iraq. Israel and other American friends in the region interpreted the American withdrawal as both a retreat from a region and abandonment of a quasi-ally, the Syrian Kurds.

Rodríguez: After Trump's exit, Turkey has entered again in the war scene with virulence. Why is Ankara allowed to engage in large-scale warfare without the permission of the United Nations?

Sorenson: Most countries do not regard approval from the UN as essential to enter another country. The United States got a UN endorsement to evict Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait, and to Korea in 1950, but did not get UN permission to send forces to Vietnam, nor for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Turkey most likely knew that Russia would veto any effort to approve its movement of troops into Syria, as Russia has supported and defended the Assad regime.

Rodríguez: There were several actors on the ground depending on American protection, such as Syrian Kurds. What policy will be taken to prevent them from being punished by Turkey or Syria?

Sorenson: The Syrian Democratic Forces got no protection after the American force withdrawal. Turkish forces attacked them and drove them south. They have been trying to pact with their former enemy, the Assad regime, to protect them from further Turkish attacks. There is an uneasy status quo now, but it is likely that if the Kurdish forces try to regain territory, they will once again draw fire from Turkey. Turkey seems to have a long-term plan to control the 70 km or so of Syrian territory that borders Turkey, and plans to settle Syrian refugees now in Turkey. These refugees are mostly Arab and not Kurd, so there is the risk of further violence in the region.

Rodríguez: What predictions can be suggested for the evolution of a conflict that has local, regional, and global connotations?

Sorenson: This conflict could last for many more years, in reduced form. It is not likely that the great powers will want to play too strong a role, as the risk of escalation is high. Moreover, the cost of the Syrian Civil War has been catastrophic destruction of Syria, with a 300 billion USD price to take the country back to where it was in 2010. So, having forces in Syria may have relatively marginal value for Russia. Iran is facing pressure domestically to stop funding movements outside of Iran and spend more domestically. Even Hezbollah is withdrawing forces from Syria. Russia has put pressure on remaining Iranian forces in Syria to move at least 70 km from the Israeli border. Thus it appears that all sides understand that the benefits of continued fighting are minimal and have therefore acted to reduce the costs and risks of future conflict. The exception is ISIS, who is now using Syrian territory to rebuild its organization. If it succeeds in doing this, it may draw in a coalition of former rivals who have a common interest in defeating and destroying ISIS.

Rodríguez: Dear Dr Sorenson, thank you very much for your attention and your time. It has been a pleasure to draw upon your experience. We hope to have your valuable insight again in the near future.