

Syria's Assad has fallen

# Just as Pentagon planned 23 years ago



THE NEW ARAB



By Jonathan Cook  
Author,  
award-winning  
journalist

OPINION

Wesley Clark, a former US Army general, recalled a moment weeks after the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001 when he visited the Pentagon. He was shown a classified document that set out how the US was going to “take out seven countries in five years, starting with Iraq, then Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and finishing off with Iran”. None of these states had any obvious connection to the events of 9/11. The one that did have such a connection — Saudi Arabia — was not on the list and has remained one of the United States’ most favoured client states. The order of targets prioritised by Washington had to be modified — and the timeline was way off — but the realisation of that 2001 blueprint is closer than ever.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the US and UK, on false pretences, led to the removal of dictator Saddam Hussein and the collapse of the Iraqi state. The country was plunged into a devastating sectarian war, from which it is still struggling to recover.

NATO meddling in Libya, again on false pretences, led to the removal of dictator Muammar Gaddafi and the collapse of the Libyan state in 2011. It has been a failed state run by warlords ever since.

Sudan and Somalia — the latter subject to a US-backed Ethiopian invasion in 2007 — are both basket cases, riven by all-consuming, horrifying civil wars that the US helped to stoke rather than resolve.

The destruction of these various states created the space for new ultra-violent, intolerant Islamist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) group to flourish.

Turkey’s open backing of the rebels in Syria — plus more concealed support from the CIA and MI6 — led to the removal of Syrian leader Assad and the collapse of what was left of the Syrian state. It is hard to imagine a unified authority emerging there.

Meanwhile, the terms of sur-

render foisted on Beirut to end Israel’s savage bombing of Lebanon do not look designed to hold. The already fragile sectarian arrangements barely glueing the Lebanese state together are almost certain to come unstuck in the coming months.

Iran, the last target on the Pentagon’s list, is now fully in the cross-hairs. Deprived of allies in Syria, it is also now largely cut off from its Hezbollah allies in Lebanon.

## Access to oil

The 2001 Pentagon memo shown to Clark was, in fact, a reworking of a military blueprint for the Middle East that had been circulating in Washington for even longer — and had nothing to do with responding to 9/11 or terrorism.

It was all about securing Israel’s place as a forward base for US interests in the oil-rich region.

The champions of this idea were an increasingly influential group called the neoconservatives — or neocons for short.

By 1996, they had formalized their plan for “remaking” the Middle East into a document called A Clean Break. It proposed that Israel should tear up the Oslo Accords and any moves towards peacemaking with the Palestinians — the title’s “clean

break” — and instead go on the offensive against its regional foes, with US backing.

What did that mean? Israel had to be helped to begin “weakening, containing, and even rolling back Syria”, observed the authors, and then “removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq”. The next stage would be to “wean the south Lebanese Shia away from Hizballah, Iran, and Syria”.

Four years before A Clean Break, the neocons explained that the primary aim of US foreign policy in the Middle East was to “preserve US and Western access to the region’s oil”. A close second was easing Israel’s path to riding itself of the so-called “Palestinian problem”.

Later, in a document published in 2000, titled “Rebuilding America’s Defenses,” they clarified that the US must ensure it retained “forward-based forces” in the Middle East to maintain military dominance there “given the longstanding American interests in the region”. Those interests primarily being, of course, oil.

The ultimate concern, the paper explained, was stopping China from developing closer ties to key oil states such as Iran.

The authors of these documents would soon be holding key po-

sitions in the George W Bush administration that took office in January 2001.

Ensnconed in the Pentagon and State Department, they were only too ready to exploit 9/11 as the pretext to fast-track their pre-existing agenda, as Clark understood from the Pentagon memo.

## Bloody nose

Syria was viewed by the neocons and Israel as the lynchpin, the supply line, between Iran and Hezbollah, Tehran’s critically important military ally in Lebanon. Severing that link was a priority. It was chiefly Hezbollah’s well-fortified and concealed positions in south Lebanon, as well as its large stockpile of rockets delivered by Iran, that kept Israel in check militarily.

Israel received an unexpected, bloody nose when it tried to reoccupy south Lebanon in 2006. It was forced to beat a hasty retreat within weeks. Israel also had to abandon plans to expand that same war into Syria — a failure that infuriated Washington’s neocons at the time.

Hezbollah’s rocket arsenal was also a brake on Israel’s ambitions to ethnically cleanse — or worse — the Palestinians from their lands in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, as

current events have demonstrated.

Ultimately, Israel realized there was no way to complete its genocide of Gaza without neutralizing Hezbollah and Syria and containing Iran.

So how involved in practice was Washington in Assad’s fall? There are plenty of clues marking the way.

After Israel’s 2006 failure, the US looked for a new route to reach the same destination. Operation Timber Sycamore was born in secret shortly after the Arab Spring erupted in 2011.

This covert military operation was designed to work in conjunction with an increasingly draconian sanctions regime to throttle the Syrian economy.

The CIA, supported by Britain’s MI6, began working in secret to topple Assad. Saudi Arabia was intimately involved too, presumably because of its deep ties to extreme jihadist groups across the region, including Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, that would soon become central to the regime-change operation.

Jake Sullivan, now Joe Biden’s national security adviser, was clear about who was going to help. In an email in late 2012, as Timber Sycamore was being put together, he wrote to then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton

to avoid any confusion about Washington’s allies: “AQ [Al-Qaeda] are on our side in Syria.”

An email sent to Clinton earlier, in the spring of 2012, had laid out the emerging thinking in the State Department.

“US diplomats and Pentagon can start strengthening the opposition. It will take time,” the email asserted. “The payoff will be substantial.”

“Iran would be strategically isolated, unable to exert its influence in the Middle East... Hezbollah in Lebanon would be cut off from its Iranian sponsors since Syria would no longer be a transit point for Iranian training, assistance, and missiles.”

The chief beneficiary was clear too: “America can and should help them [Syrian rebels] — and by doing so, help Israel.”

## Building the rebels

According to US officials, the CIA had trained and equipped nearly 10,000 fighters by the summer of 2015, at an annual cost of \$100,000 per rebel.

Riyadh supplied yet more money and weapons, drawing in Islamist fighters and mercenaries from the wider region. Jordan hosted the training bases. The CIA and the Saudis jointly supplied the rebels with the intelligence needed to guide their

A US military vehicle patrols the oil fields in the town of Qahtaniyah in Syria’s north-eastern Hasakah province, near the Turkish border, on May 8, 2020.

DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP