



Syria: From Valued Ally to “Vicious Enemy”

These days U.S. officials call the Assad regime just about every name in the book, as the *Guardian*'s [Mehdi Hasan](#) recounts:

“President Obama has accused it of committing ‘outrageous bloodshed’ and called for Assad to stand down; Hillary Clinton has referred to the Syrian leader as a “tyrant”; Elliot Abrams, Deputy National Security Adviser under George W. Bush, has called Syria a ‘vicious enemy.’”



The Obama administration has already imposed [sanctions](#) on Syria and tried to get the United Nations to impose more, an attempt that was [thwarted](#) by Russia and China.

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Yet just a decade ago Syria was considered an ally in the War on Terror. What’s more, the U.S. government valued Assad’s regime precisely because of its brutality — the same brutality U.S. officials now condemn.

You see, sometimes people the United States suspects of terrorism refuse to confess or to provide other information Washington desires. Since torture is (or at least was) a technique in which our government is not legally permitted to engage, Presidents have found it beneficial to discreetly transfer suspects to foreign countries so that those countries’ governments, not bound by the laws of a civilized people, can torture the suspects and extract the desired confession or other information from them — all the while giving the President cover by assuring him, with a wink and a nod, that the prisoners will be treated humanely. This process, known as “extraordinary rendition,” has been used since the Reagan administration, if not earlier, but it became much more common after 9/11.

In 2002, Maher Arar, a Syrian-born Canadian citizen, was returning to the Great White North after a vacation in Tunisia. During a layover in New York’s John F. Kennedy International Airport, Arar was arrested by U.S. authorities, who proceeded to interrogate him for 13 days. Since Arar would not tell them what they wanted to hear, they shipped him off to Syria, where he was held in a tiny, dark, rat-infested cell and “punched, kicked and whipped with an electrical cable during 18-hour interrogation sessions,” Hasan writes. Those interrogation sessions, by the way, consisted of exactly the same questions Arar had been asked in New York, so there is no doubt that the U.S. government knew exactly what was going on.

After all that, the Syrian government came to the conclusion that Arar was “completely innocent,” according to [CBS News](#). An official Canadian government inquiry in 2007 agreed. Ottawa paid Arar \$8.5 million in compensation, and Prime Minister Stephen Harper formally apologized for his government’s complicity in Arar’s rendition and torture.

Arar was just one of “hundreds of terror suspects captured in different parts of the world [and



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rendered] to Middle Eastern countries for tough interrogations,” CBS News reports. And among those Middle Eastern countries, “Syria was one of the ‘most common’ destinations for rendered suspects,” Hasan writes, quoting Jane Mayer of the *New Yorker*.

“If you want a serious interrogation, you send a prisoner to Jordan,” former CIA agent Robert Baer said in 2004. “If you want them to be tortured, you send them to Syria.”

“The evidence,” Hasan observes, “is overwhelming: in the months and years after 9/11, the U.S. collaborated closely with Syria, which became an ally in the war on terror and a frequent destination for victims of extraordinary rendition. Syrian torturers worked hand in hand with U.S. interrogators.”

Now, however, “the U.S. government is expressing a born-again fervor against Syria’s dictatorship,” remarks Future of Freedom Foundation president Jacob Hornberger, who remains unconvinced that our leaders are sincere in their conversion, especially since they are “still supporting Egypt’s brutal military dictatorship.” Egypt, too, has been frequently used for prisoner rendition, a fact that blew up in Washington’s face when an Italian judge convicted 23 Americans (22 CIA agents and an Air Force colonel) of kidnapping Egyptian cleric Abu Omar off the streets of Milan and rendering him to his country of origin, where, he said, he was tortured. Like Arar, Omar was found not guilty by the very government that had imprisoned and allegedly tortured him at the behest of the United States.

Of course, allying itself with a brutal dictator and then turning on him when convenient is nothing new for the U.S. government. Joseph Stalin, Manuel Noriega, and Saddam Hussein were each allied with the United States at one time only to find themselves branded threats to the entire world — which in Stalin’s case at least bore some resemblance to the truth — when they no longer served Washington’s purposes. It therefore comes as no surprise that our leaders would use Assad when he suited their needs and then toss him aside when his usefulness had passed. (One might argue that rendering prisoners to Syria was a Bush administration policy and that Obama is entitled to his own opinion of Assad; but Obama has not abandoned rendition in principle, and his administration even convinced the Supreme Court not to hear Arar’s case against the government using the [very same rationale](#) the Bush administration had employed in lower courts for years.)

Though Americans prefer to ignore such hypocrisy on the part of their own government, it does not go unnoticed in other countries, particularly those that Washington has deemed ripe for “regime change.” Syria is just the latest example; and one can be certain that Syrians and their Arab brethren are asking the very same question as Hornberger: Given that Washington has long been buddy-buddy with Damascus precisely because the Assad regime’s brutality was useful to the United States, is Washington’s sudden concern with the regime’s human-rights record genuine, or is it “simply because U.S. officials see an opportunity to install another dictatorship in its stead, one that will be even more willing to do the U.S. government’s bidding than the current Syrian regime?”

Photo of Bashar al-Assad: AP Images



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