

Intel Vets Call 'Dissent Memo' on Syria 'Reckless'

A group of U.S. intelligence veterans urges President Obama to resist the "reckless" call for a wider Syrian war from 51 State Department officials in a recent "dissent memo."

MEMORANDUM FOR: Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

Subject: Beware Foggy Bottom Dissent

Dissent and disagreement within the foreign policy and national security bureaucracy only comes to the public's attention when there are deep and fundamental differences of opinion about the execution and objectives of a U.S. policy. Instances of dissent emerged during the war in Vietnam and have reappeared periodically, e.g., during the Contra War in Central America in the 1980s and the Cold War with the Soviets. We can now add Syria to this list.

The latest media buzz came with the leak that 51 "State Department Diplomats" [signed a dissent letter](#) advocating direct U.S. bombing as a tool to force Syria into submission to our government's dictates. U.S. Foreign Service Officers are a unique collection of highly educated people, who take great pride in having passed the Foreign Service Exam. Yet even among such "bright people," some succumb to the forces of careerism and the pressures to politicize intelligence.

Unfortunately the dissent signers are calling for America to threaten, and if our bluff is called, commit acts of overt, aggressive war against the forces of a sovereign nation on its own territory. One whose supporters include Russia, the world's other big nuclear power.

The line of thought – that it is America's right and duty to employ large-scale death to enforce its leaders' will on other peoples – adheres to the noxious notion that the U.S.A. enjoys uniquely privileged standing as the "sole indispensable country in the world." If this was ever an arguably legitimate position, that time is long gone – and today demonstrably blinds its adherents to common sense.

Such thinking is not new. Theodore Roosevelt popularized it as we went to war to annex Spanish territories in the Philippines and Caribbean – at the cost of over half a million indigenous lives – more than a century ago. We saw it, in spades, with the "Best and the Brightest" – those responsible for destroying Vietnam.

Three million Vietnamese people died in that war (according to former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara), and another two million or so in its Indochina spin-offs. After this slaughter and the deaths of scores of thousands of its own troops, the U.S. endured a complete and humiliating defeat, one affecting its foreign policy and domestic politics to this day. Their bright successors supported the attack on Iraq in 2003, the catalyst for an outbreak of violence that has brought death reaching into the millions – again – in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and other neighboring locales we'll eventually read about. This aggression has created millions more traumatized refugees.

The memo, a draft of which was provided to *The New York Times* (and *Wall Street Journal*), presumably by one of the State Department employees who authored it, claims American policy has been “overwhelmed” by the unrelenting violence in Syria and calls for “a judicious use of stand-off and air weapons, which would undergird and drive a more focused and hard-nosed U.S.-led diplomatic process.” Furthermore, per the *NYT*:

“In the memo, the State Department officials wrote that the Assad government’s continuing violations of the partial cease-fire, officially known as a cessation of hostilities, will doom efforts to broker a political settlement because Mr. Assad will feel no pressure to negotiate with the moderate opposition or other factions fighting him. The government’s barrel bombing of civilians, it said, is the ‘root cause of the instability that continues to grip Syria and the broader region.’

“The memo acknowledged that military action would have risks, not the least of which would be increased tension with Russia, which intervened in the war on Mr. Assad’s behalf last fall. Russia subsequently helped negotiate the cease-fire. Those tensions increased on Thursday when, according to a senior Pentagon official, Russia conducted airstrikes in southern Syria against American-backed forces fighting the Islamic State.”

The dissenters were smart enough to insist they were not “advocating for a slippery slope that ends in a military confrontation with Russia,” but rather a credible threat of military action “to keep Mr. Assad in line.” Easier said than done! The 51 are silent on this point of major importance.

The foundational premise of their dissent is that Assad’s “barrel bombing” (followed by chemical attacks) on civilians provoked civil war in Syria. It’s true that the initial phase of the Syrian Spring seems to have been largely spontaneous. Facts show, however, that [outside interveners](#) – primarily the United States, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Israel and Saudi Arabia – cooperated in lighting the match that brought the inferno of civil war. Covert funding and provision of weapons and other material support to opposition groups for strikes

against the Syrian Government provoked a military reaction by Assad – which created a pretext for our enlarged support to the rebel groups.

A large body of evidence also [suggests](#) that it was the U.S.-backed rebel forces that employed chemical weapons on civilians, and then blamed Assad, in a propaganda effort to advance international public support for overt American intervention.

U.S. actions against Syria have been widely perceived to be part of a broader proxy battle with Iran, being pursued to push back against its expanded influence in the Middle East. But Iran's emergence as a regional power was not the result of a magical event. It was a direct consequence of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and our subsequent decision to eradicate every vestige of the Baathist party and to install Iraqi Shia leaders with close ties to Iran in the positions of leadership.

We have thus helped start a war and then have the audacity to pretend to be shocked at the consequences of our own action.

The State Department dissenters were not the first to land a blow in this new PR battle over the course of U.S. policy in Syria. The Department of Defense and CIA appear to have entered the fray two weeks ago. According to [a report](#) in *The Daily Beast*, DOD and CIA are in a “cat fight.”

Two Department of Defense officials told that media outlet that they are not eager to support rebels fighting in the city of Aleppo because they are believed to be affiliated with al Qaeda in Syria, or Jabhat al Nusra. The CIA, which supports those rebel groups, rejects that claim, saying alliances of convenience in the face of a mounting Russian-led offensive have created marriages of battlefield necessity, not ideology.

“It is a strange thing that DOD hall chatter mimics Russian propaganda,” one U.S. official, who supports the intelligence community position, wryly noted about Pentagon claims that the opposition and Nusra are one in the same.

The intelligence community, which backed opposition forces in Aleppo, believes ISIS cannot be defeated as long as Assad is in power. The terror group, they say, thrives in unstable territories. And only local forces – like the ones backed by the CIA – can mitigate that threat.

“The status of the opposition is resilient in the face of horrendous attacks by the Syrian and Russian forces,” a U.S. intelligence official explained to *The Daily Beast*. “The defeat of Assad is a necessary precondition to ultimately defeat [ISIS]. As long as there is a failed leader in Damascus and a failed state in Syria, [ISIS] will have a place to operate from. You can't deal with

ISIS if you have a failed state," the U.S. official observed.

This unnamed official conveniently ignores the fact that the U.S. is working aggressively to facilitate Syria's failure. We are astonished. After 15 years of strident rhetoric about waging a war on Al Qaeda, we have now come full circle to witness the CIA and a vocal bloc within the State Department advocate to arm and train an Al Qaeda affiliated group.

It's impossible to know whether or not the eruption of this dispute is a slap to the face of President Obama simply because the President appeared to support the overthrow of Assad but then backed away from the precipice of militarily taking him out.

The [influence of Saudi Arabia](#) in helping push and promote "regime change" in Syria cannot be underestimated. The Saudis also have reportedly funneled significant money into key sectors of the U.S. foreign policy establishment and, it would appear, have obtained considerable influence over our national security policy. More evidence is coming to light that the Saudis have given significant amounts to the Clinton Foundation.

A recent [report](#) on the *Petra News Agency* site (which was subsequently taken down and claimed to have been a "hack") raises some important concerns. On Sunday a report appeared on that website that included what were described as exclusive comments from Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The comments included a claim that Riyadh has provided 20 percent of the total funding to the prospective Democratic candidate's campaign. Although the report did not remain on the website for long, the Washington-based Institute for Gulf Affairs later [re-published](#) an Arabic version of it, which quoted Prince Mohammed as having said Saudi Arabia had provided with "full enthusiasm" an undisclosed amount of money to Clinton.

In light of Hillary Clinton's strong advocacy for imposing a No Fly Zone in Syria, which would put us on track for stepped up intervention in Syria and a military confrontation with the Russians, it is natural to wonder if Saudi donations had any influence over the direction of U.S. policy in Syria and support for rebel groups?

In sum, the latest memo from the 51 State Department officers is just one more alarming indication of disarray and failure within the U.S. foreign policy establishment. Notably, most of *their* children and grandchildren will not be in the military ranks of those called on to fight this war. They are too smart and too "valuable" to engage in such ridiculous endeavors. So something called a "Volunteer Army" was assembled, populated by "volunteers" – mostly from the

inner-cities and the small towns of our country, where jobs and education are elusive.

This almost unprecedented dissent letter from 51 emboldened State Department hawks is an alarming new sign of the reckless direction that well-organized elements of the U.S. foreign policy establishment seek to take us. Thus, we appeal to you, as Assistant to the President for National Security, to help President Barack Obama stand firm against such institutional destructiveness and to sort out the disarray and bureaucratic contention among his "Team of Rivals." If the 51 are sincere in their advocacy of a let's-try-some-more-of-the-same-but-tougher policy, we would expect them to welcome the personal risks involved in being sent off to bash Bashar with "standoff" – or – "closer-quarter" weapons. This could provide them initially with a sense of affirmation – then later, an education.

(Also see earlier remarks by individual VIPS members: by Ann Wright, [here](#), by Elizabeth Murray and Ray McGovern [here](#); by Philip Giraldi, [here](#).)

For the Steering Group, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

William Binney, former Technical Director, World Geopolitical & Military Analysis, NSA; co-founder, SIGINT Automation Research Center (ret.)

Philip Giraldi, CIA, Operations Officer (ret.)

Mike Gravel, former Adjutant, top secret control officer, Communications Intelligence Service; special agent of the Counter Intelligence Corps and former United States Senator

Matthew Hoh, former Capt., USMC, Iraq & Foreign Service Officer, Afghanistan (associate VIPS)

Larry Johnson, CIA & State Department (ret.)

Michael S. Kearns, Intelligence Officer, USAF (ret.); former Master SERE Instructor.

John Kiriakou, Former CIA Counterterrorism Officer and former Senior Investigator, Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Karen Kwiatkowski, former Lt. Col., US Air Force (ret.), at Office of Secretary of Defense watching the manufacture of lies on Iraq, 2001-2003

Edward Loomis, NSA, Cryptologic Computer Scientist (ret.)

David MacMichael, National Intelligence Council (ret.)

Ray McGovern, former US Army infantry/intelligence officer & CIA analyst (ret.)

Elizabeth Murray, Deputy National Intelligence Officer for Near East, CIA and National Intelligence Council (ret.)

Todd E. Pierce, MAJ, US Army Judge Advocate (Ret.)

Coleen Rowley, FBI Special Agent and former Minneapolis Division Legal Counsel (ret.)

Peter Van Buren, U.S. Department of State, Foreign Service Officer (ret.) (associate VIPS)

J. Kirk Wiebe, former Senior Analyst, SIGINT Automation Research Center, NSA

Ann Wright, Col., US Army (ret.); Foreign Service Officer (resigned in opposition to launching of Iraq War)

European Union's Imperial Overreach

Exclusive: The European Union's haughty and hasty expansion into low-wage Eastern Europe may be its undoing, as the Brexit vote shows popular resistance to the westward migration of workers that followed, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

While few analysts are putting it this way, the European Union suffers from a self-inflicted crisis of overexpansion – a form of “imperial overstretch,” if you will. The Brexit vote was just the latest symptom of this policy disaster, which also includes escalating confrontations with Russia and the ongoing crisis in Ukraine.

Public opinion polls in the United Kingdom established that widespread concern over immigration was the single most important factor driving voters to support an E.U. exit. Pro-Brexit campaigners made much of the statistics released just last month that net annual migration into the U.K. reached a third of a million people in 2015, double the rate just three years earlier.

Such numbers fed public concerns over the impact of immigrants on the country's National Health System and other social services, as well as jobs. They also fed deep suspicions about government credibility.

As the *Guardian* reported after the stunning election victory for the Brexit

camp, “David Cameron’s failure to give a convincing response to the publication of near-record net migration figures in the first week of the EU referendum campaign has proved to be its decisive moment.

“The figure of 333,000 not only underlined beyond any doubt that Britain had become a country of mass migration but also meant politicians who claimed they could make deep cuts in the numbers while Britain remained in the European Union were simply not believed.”

The influx of these newcomers had a deeper psychological effect on the public. “The British government’s inability to control (intra-European) migration is seen as emblematic of a wider loss of control,” wrote Oxford political theorist David Miller just before the election. “Many Britons feel that they are no longer in charge of their own destiny: ‘Take back our country’ is a slogan that resonates along the campaign trail.”

E.U. Expansion and Immigration

Roughly half of immigrants to the U.K. in recent years have come from other E.U. countries, taking advantage of the association’s fundamental commitment to the free movement of people. Their large numbers reflected the enormous expansion of the E.U. since 2004 – and the lure of Britain’s relatively affluent economy to poor workers from newer members like Poland and Romania.

The E.U. – which actually has a commissioner for “enlargement” – has expanded relentlessly without heeding concerns from grassroots constituents of its traditional core members. In 2004, the E.U. absorbed Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia – all low-wage countries with much lower standards of living than the likes of Germany, France or the U.K. In 2007, it also took in Romania and Bulgaria.

Official statistics show that citizens of these newer and poorer E.U. members account for nearly a third of net migration into the U.K. in recent years.

Although many economists defend free labor movement as good for the economy overall, the result – like that of free trade with low-wage countries – can harm less-skilled workers.

In 2011, two unpublished reports commissioned by the Department of Communities and Local Government made that point.

One warned senior government officials that sharply rising immigration could “increase tensions between migrant workers and other sections of the community” during the country’s recession. Another noted a huge rise in immigrants settling unexpectedly in rural areas, and concluded they were having “a negative impact

on the wages of UK workers at the bottom of the occupational distribution.”

“We under-estimated significantly the number of people who were going to come in from Eastern Europe,” conceded Ed Milliband, leader of the Labour Party.

“Economic migration and greater labour market flexibility have increased the pressure faced by those in lower skilled work.”

Ironically, many of the localities that voted most decisively for Brexit had relatively low migrant populations. But many of them are still suffering from economic austerity and sharp reductions in the social safety net imposed by the Conservative government since 2010.

“Switching the scapegoat from the government to the faceless migrant . . . is easier when people are scared for their livelihood, and more convenient for the politicians campaigning on both sides,” remarked the London-based writer Dawn Foster.

Voters were easily persuaded that “distant” and “faceless” E.U. bureaucrats just didn’t grasp their concerns. Indeed, the E.U. remains bent on continued expansion. It is currently in membership discussions with Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey, and recognizes Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo as potential members.

Russia and Ukraine

The E.U.’s expansionist drive has had other costly repercussions for Britain and the rest of Europe. One notable disaster was its drive for an “association agreement” with Ukraine, a wide-ranging treaty that included not only provisions for tight economic integration, but also a commitment over time to abide by the E.U.’s Common Security and Defense Policy and European Defense Agency policies. On both fronts, the agreement was designed to pull Ukraine out of its traditional Russian orbit.

The E.U.’s expansion into Ukraine, like its expansion into the rest of Eastern Europe, was paralleled by the expansion of the NATO military alliance into the same countries, contrary to promises by Western leaders to their Russian counterparts in 1990. In 2008, NATO’s secretary general – backed by President George W. Bush and presidential candidate Barack Obama – pledged that Ukraine would be granted NATO membership.

Needless to say, Russia reacted badly, as it did to the E.U.’s later power play. It pressured the government of President Viktor Yanukovich to resist entreaties by NATO and the E.U. His refusal to break with Russia in turn triggered the so-called “Euromaidan” protests and the Western-backed putsch that ousted his government in February 2014.

Within a month, the new pro-European and pro-U.S. prime minister, Arseniy Yatseniuk, had signed the political provisions of the E.U. agreement. Just months later, he declared that he would seek NATO membership as well.

The result has been a bloody civil war in Eastern Ukraine; dangerous and costly military confrontations between Russia and NATO; and mutual economic sanctions that impoverish both Russia and the E.U.

Future historians will help us understand the underlying sources of the E.U.'s self-destructive expansion. No doubt they include some combination of ideological faith in the universality of European values, bureaucratic aggrandizement, and pandering to neo-liberal elites. Whatever the causes, the results now threaten the entire European project.

The E.U.'s future will require serious self-examination on many fronts, but especially about its grandiose ambitions for expansion.

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international affairs, including *The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War and the International Drug Traffic* (Stanford University Press, 2012). Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews were "Risky Blowback from Russian Sanctions"; "The US Hand in the Syrian Mess"; "Hidden Origins of Syria's Civil War"; and "Israel Covets Golan's Water and Now Oil."

Meyer Lansky's Heirs Want Money from Cuba

A curious twist in the renewed U.S.-Cuban relations is the claim by Mafia financier Meyer Lansky's heirs for damages from the loss of Lansky's Havana casinos, which Fidel Castro nationalized after the revolution in 1959, writes Jack Colhoun.

By Jack Colhoun

The heirs of Meyer Lansky, the impresario of the North American Mafia gambling colony in Cuba, a reign that lasted from 1933 to 1958, are betting on a big payback from the negotiations between the United States and Cuba to normalize relations between the two countries.

Compensation claims by U.S. citizens or businesses for properties nationalized by the Cuban revolution are among the issues under discussion. Lansky's daughter Sandi, her son Gary Rapoport, and her brother Paul have filed a compensation

claim against Cuba for the Riviera Hotel and Casino with the U.S. Foreign Claims Settlement Commission.

The Cuban revolution confiscated the Riviera and other Mafia-owned properties after it toppled the gangster-linked regime of General Fulgencio Batista in 1959.

“It was through my grandfather’s hard work that the hotel was built,” Rapoport told the U. K. *Daily Mail Online* on Dec. 23, 2015. “We are his natural relations By right, it should be our property.” He said the Riviera is valued at \$70 million. The *Tampa Bay Tribune*, *Reuters*, and *Haaretz* have also covered the story. (Lansky died in 1983 at the age of 80 from lung cancer, living his final years quietly in Miami Beach.)

The Riviera, which overlooks the Straits of Florida, was the crown jewel of Lansky’s casinos, hotels and nightclubs in Havana. When the Riviera opened in December 1957, it was the largest Mafia-owned hotel-casino outside Las Vegas. The hotel’s 440 double rooms were booked solid for the winter season of 1957-1958.

However, the narrative that the success of the Riviera was the product of Meyer Lansky’s “hard work” is undercut by Lansky’s own assessment of his arrangement with Batista. Lansky talked candidly about his years in Cuba with Israeli national security writers Dennis Eisenberg, Uri Dan, and Eli Landau for their admiring biography *Meyer Lansky: Mogul of the Mob* (Paddington Press, 1979). (Lansky lived in Israel in 1970-1971 to avoid tax evasion charges in the United States.)

Lansky pitched his plan to Batista to open Mafia owned casinos and nightclubs in Cuba in 1933. Lansky promised to make Batista, who had just come to power in a *coup d’etat*, a partner. Batista and his inner circle would get regular payments from the Mafia gamblers. In return, the gangsters would be allowed to operate without interference from Cuban authorities. With a handshake and an *abrazo*, Lansky and Batista laid the foundations of the Cuban gangster state.

“Working on the well-known principle that it’s better to use other people’s money than your own, Lansky persuaded Batista to have the Cuban government help finance the venture,” Eisenberg, Dan, and Landau wrote. “The [Cuban] government agreed to back every dollar invested on the island by foreigners with a dollar of its own and to give every hotel that cost more than one million dollars the precious prize of a gambling license . . . and the casino hotels would not have to pay Cuban taxes.”

Lansky’s Crown Jewel

The Riviera was one of four new hotels with casinos, which opened in Havana between 1955 and 1958. Cuban development banks subsidized 50 percent of Lansky's \$14 million Riviera project; Lansky-linked investors provided the rest. Senator Eduardo Suarez Rivas, brother of Batista's Minister of Labor Jose Suarez Rivas, was secretary of the *Compania de Hotels La Riviera de Cuba*, which operated the Riviera.

The Mafia gambling colony was the cornerstone of the Cuban gangster state. The gangsters' graft bound Batista, his inner circle, senior security officers, and the Mafia together in the defense of one of the most repressive regimes in Latin America. As a CIA report put it, "In return for the loyalty they gave him, Batista always backed his security services. In times of crisis, he often suspended civil guarantees . . . and gave the services a free hand."

In 1958, Fidel Castro's July 26th Movement denounced the Mafia in radio broadcasts from the guerrilla group's redoubt in the Sierra Maestra, accusing the Mafia of turning Havana into a center of commercialized vice – gambling, prostitution, and drugs. The days of the North American gangsters in Cuba were numbered when Batista fled into exile on Jan. 1, 1959. When Castro arrived in Havana on Jan. 8, he vowed to "clean out all the gamblers."

The Riviera and other gangster-owned properties were nationalized, and the Mafia gamblers returned to the United States. To regain control of its casinos, hotels and nightclubs in post-Castro Cuba, the Mafia waged a covert war on the Cuban revolution. The gangsters regrouped with their Cuban political allies, now in exile in the United States. The Mafia subsidized Cuban exile leaders and supplied arms to Cuban exile commando groups for attacks on Cuban targets from speedy boats and small aircraft.

The gangsters also plotted with the CIA to assassinate Fidel Castro. In 1959, Lansky volunteered to arrange the assassination of Castro in a meeting with the CIA, according to Doc Stacher, a life-long Lansky associate.

"He [Lansky] indicated to the CIA that some of his people who were still on the island, or those who were just going back, might assassinate Castro," Stacher told his Israeli biographers. "Meyer Lansky thought that if Castro would be eliminated there was a good chance for Batista to make a comeback. . . . He told them [CIA officers] he was quite prepared to finance the operation himself."

From 1960 to 1963, the CIA and the Mafia plotted covertly to assassinate Castro. So, to portray Lansky as an aggrieved victim of Cuba is to stand history on its head. There should be no compensation for the heirs of the former Mafia gamblers in Cuba.

Jack Colhoun is an historian of the Cold War (University of Wisconsin, Madison, BA, 1968; York University, Toronto, PhD, 1976), an investigative reporter, and professional archival researcher. His work has appeared in the Washington Post, Toronto Star, Salon, History News Network, The Nation, The Progressive, In These Times, the former (New York) Guardian newsweekly, and former Covert Action Quarterly. He is the author of *Gangsterismo: The United States, Cuba, and the Mafia, 1933-1966* (New York: OR Books, 2013). [This article previously appeared at <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/162856>]
