

By Seymour M. Hersh

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Barack Obama's repeated insistence that Bashar al-Assad must leave office – and that there are 'moderate' rebel groups in Syria capable of defeating him – has in recent years provoked quiet dissent, and even overt opposition, among some of the most senior officers on the Pentagon's Joint Staff. Their criticism has focused on what they see as the administration's fixation on Assad's primary ally, Vladimir Putin. In their view, Obama is captive to Cold War thinking about Russia and China, and hasn't adjusted his stance on Syria to the fact both countries share Washington's anxiety about the spread of terrorism in and beyond Syria; like Washington, they believe that Islamic State must be stopped.

The military's resistance dates back to the summer of 2013, when a highly classified assessment, put together by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, then led by General Martin Dempsey, forecast that the fall of the Assad regime would lead to chaos and, potentially, to Syria's takeover by jihadi extremists, much as was then happening in Libya. A former senior adviser to the Joint Chiefs told me that the document was an 'all-source' appraisal, drawing on information from signals, satellite and human intelligence, and took a dim view of the Obama administration's insistence on continuing to finance and arm the so-called moderate rebel groups. By then, the CIA had been conspiring for more than a year with allies in the UK, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to ship guns and goods – to be used for the overthrow of Assad – from Libya, via Turkey, into Syria. The new intelligence estimate singled out Turkey as a major impediment to Obama's Syria policy. The document showed, the adviser said, 'that what was started as a covert US programme to arm and support the moderate rebels fighting Assad had been co-opted by Turkey, and had morphed into an across-the-board technical, arms and logistical programme for all of the opposition, including Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State. The so-called moderates had evaporated and the Free Syrian Army was a rump group stationed at an airbase in Turkey.' The assessment was bleak: there was no viable 'moderate' opposition to Assad, and the US was arming extremists.

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