

CIA-funded task force was at forefront of U.S. regime change plot in Syria

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By Ivan Kesic

“Syria is free,” wrote the Syrian Emergency Task Force (SETF) in a post on X, formerly Twitter, shortly after a cluster of militant groups swarmed Damascus on Sunday and overthrew Bashar al-Assad’s government.

“Mission Accomplished. The Syrian Emergency Task Force is proud to announce that the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran have been officially defeated in Syria by the Syrian people on their own and without any outside support from the international community,” the statement read.

In response, an X user took a swipe at the SETF, saying that an al-Qaeda leader with strong ties to the Daesh terrorist group and Western intelligence agencies “is the exact freedom I was hoping for.”

SETF has long been at the forefront of the American “regime change” project in Syria, funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), a proxy organization of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the foreign spy agency of the US military-industrial complex.

Operating under the guise of “bringing an end to atrocities against Syrian civilians,” this maligned agency has actively pursued Washington’s “regime change” agenda in Syria through crippling sanctions and psychological operations to sway public opinion in the Arab country against its elected government.

Only a day after Assad was ousted from Damascus, SETF Executive Director Mouaz Moustafa met with US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan to discuss the accomplishment of the American “mission.”

Moustafa reportedly also called for greater support from the US government as a reward.

SETF and American dollars

Leaked documents reveal that SETF has received millions of dollars over the years to aggressively further the agenda of the US and its allies in Syria, with funding channeled through USAID.

“Check out SETF’s \$153,535 grant from USAID, a CIA cutout. It not only earmarks the delivery of aid to Rukhban camp but also covers ‘conducting key informant interviews,’” wrote American journalist Max Blumenthal in a post on X, sharing an image of one such receipt.

SETF’s grant from USAID

“SETF has been at the forefront of lobbying for the US to wage war on Syria, taking John McCain on his notorious trip in 2013 before he called to bomb Damascus. It played a seminal role in the Caesar sanctions, which have plunged Syrian civilians into poverty, and remain at the center of all regime change activities,” Blumenthal added.

His remarks came in response to Celine Kasem, a SETF employee and one of its lead propagandists against the Assad government, whose activities have been exposed repeatedly in recent years.

David Miller, producer of the Press TV show Palestine Declassified, had in February this year highlighted the manipulative tactics employed by Kasem and her SETF colleagues in Syria.

“After I won my tribunal, Celine attempted to sabotage my legal fundraiser by inciting British Sunnis into sectarian hysteria over the failed NATO and Zionist regime change campaign in Syria,” he added.

According to Miller, such tactics form part of a “US strategy to undermine support for material resistance to Zionism,” linking SETF’s anti-Syrian government campaign to the Zionist occupation.

In March this year, SETF commemorated the 13th anniversary of the so-called “Syrian Revolution” — a militant campaign against the Damascus government — at a gathering of prominent US Republican leaders, many of whom are vocal lobbyists for the Israeli regime.

Among the attendees was Stephen Rapp, a key figure in lobbying the International Criminal Court (ICC) against granting Palestine jurisdiction to press war crime charges against Israel.

Since Sunday, following the fall of Assad's government and the militant takeover of Damascus, SETF agents have been celebrating, crediting it to the Syrian people—the same people who have suffered under crippling US sanctions imposed under the 'Caesar Act,' which SETF itself lobbied for.

SETF and the American 'regime change' plot

In his book *The Management of Savagery*, Blumenthal explains that SETF emerged as a pro-insurgency, warmongering lobbying group, funded by the US State Department and a collection of private donors.

For years, the group served as the US Congress' direct link to the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other rebel factions. Its director, Mouaz Moustafa, is a Washington, DC-based activist of Syrian origin.

Before lobbying for a military attack on his home country, Moustafa had been a consultant to the Libyan National Transitional Council during the lead-up to the invasion by the US-led NATO military alliance.

In May 2013, Moustafa approached Senator John McCain, a notorious warmonger in the US Congress, and persuaded him to visit Syria and meet with anti-government militants.

Mordechai Moti Kahana, an Israeli millionaire who coordinated efforts between these militants and the Israeli military through his NGO Amaliah, openly boasted of financing "the opposition group that took Senator John McCain to visit war-torn Syria."

The SETF's role in linking top US officials with militants was confirmed by McCain himself in his memoir *The Restless Wave*.

"I went to Turkey at the end of the month after convincing the State Department to let me enter northern Syria for a few hours. The Washington-based Syrian Emergency Task Force had arranged for me to meet with members of FSA units. I went with General Salim Idris, the head of the FSA's Supreme Military Council," he recalled in his book.

"I don't know what I had expected, but crossing the border into a war turned out to be a pretty unremarkable experience. General Idris, Brose, two Syrian Emergency Task Force staffers, and I loaded into SUVs and drove less than a mile to a border crossing, where the guards were expecting us.

"They raised the gates, and we crossed into Syria, becoming, for the time being, the highest-ranking US official to visit Syria since the war began. Another short drive took us to the building where FSA commanders from around the country had gathered to meet us."

After the meetings and the promised joint celebration in Damascus, McCain's PR office released a photo showing the senator posing beside a smiling Moustafa and two grim-looking armed rebels.

Several days later, Lebanese media identified these two men as Abu Ibrahim and Mohammad Nour, both implicated in the kidnapping of eleven Shia pilgrims a year earlier.

In June of the same year, Moustafa arranged another meeting in Syria between FSA rebels and Evan McMullin, a former CIA field officer, and vehemently protested the US State Department's designation of Al-Qaeda's Syrian branch as a terrorist group.

In 2014, further SETF activities were exposed in the documentary *Red Lines*, which was ironically intended to showcase the "democratic nature" of the rebels.

Instead, it revealed international arms and rebel smuggling, Takfiri fanatics, looting, war crimes, and McCain, and Moustafa's central role, further exposing America's covert operations in the Arab country.

The documentary detailed Moustafa's frequent trips from Washington to the Syrian-Turkish border, where he helped smuggle militants into areas they controlled in the city of Homs.

It also captured him discussing a multi-million-dollar shipment of heavy weapons and tanks from an unnamed US company, which was reportedly purchasing military equipment from the Ukrainian military after its war in Donbas.

In other scenes, Moustafa and his associates witnessed FSA militants holding prisoners in a school basement, looting a cement factory, and heard an Ahrar al-Sham official admit that they did not want democracy in Syria.

SETF also lobbied within the US to impose sanctions on Syria and played a crucial role in drafting and passing the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, which has driven millions of Syrian civilians into poverty.

In 2016, Moustafa, the head of the White Helmets Raed al-Saleh, and Congressman Eliot Engel, one of the most fervent supporters of the Israeli regime on Capitol Hill, jointly lobbied for expanded sanctions on Syria.

These sanctions targeted the country's central banking system and blocked the replacement parts for its civilian airliners, which was another big blow to the war-ravaged country.

Other similar pseudo-humanitarian organizations that aggressively campaigned for "regime change" in Syria include the UK-funded White Helmets (Syria Civil Defence), Hand in Hand for Syria (HiHFAD), and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), among others.

All of these organizations were regarded as trusted and reliable sources by Western journalists and politicians, despite their direct ties to Syrian militants, the Israeli regime, and Western intelligence agencies.

The so-called White Helmets group was founded by former British Army officer James Le Mesurier and funded by the UK and US governments. It operated in areas held by anti-government forces, providing a constant stream of images and reports of their "lifesaving work."

The effectiveness of the White Helmets was amplified by a UK-government-funded PR company called ARK, which ran its social media accounts and developed an international communications campaign to promote it. The UK Ministry of Foreign Affairs described their advocacy as "invaluable."

HiHFAD, also a UK-based group operating in both Syria and Turkey, claimed to be engaged in humanitarian work but actively campaigned for foreign military intervention in Syria.

One of its leading figures, Rola Hallam, was linked to the so-called Syrian National Coalition (SNC) anti-government group through her father, Mousa al-Kurdi.

Its co-founder, Faddy Sahloul, once openly declared that they wanted to topple Assad "no matter what lives it takes, no matter how much catastrophe it causes."

SOHR, which supposedly focuses on human rights, is actually a one-man operation based in England and funded by the British Foreign Office. It has been widely exposed as a mouthpiece for MI6.

Considering its funding sources, leadership, connections, and methods of operation, SETF undeniably belongs to the same group of organizations.

[SOURCE: PRESS TV]

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