

WHILE WE'RE INVESTIGATING INTELLIGENCE FAILURES ON SYRIA...

For the past several weeks, we've had a series of stories about how the intelligence on ISIS was cooked – at least within DIA. I had grand plans to write some posts on it – to track DIA's past recent politicization (which I think should raise some skepticism about these claims, though I find them largely credible), to how the story has developed, and to a number of things that likely aren't even being considered in whether the intelligence is cooked (such as whether treating ISIS as a terrorist group serves an analytical disservice).

Ah well – the posts that might have been.

But amid that frenzy about politicized Syria intelligence, the Guardian reports that in 2012 Russian ambassador Vitaly Churkin offered up Bashar al-Assad as part of a proposed peace deal, purportedly at his government's direction.

Russia proposed more than three years ago that Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, could step down as part of a peace deal, according to a senior negotiator involved in back-channel discussions at the time.

Former Finnish president and Nobel peace prize laureate Martti Ahtisaari said western powers failed to seize on the proposal. Since it was made, in 2012, tens of thousands of people have been killed and millions uprooted, causing the world's gravest refugee crisis since the second world war.

Ahtisaari held talks with envoys from the five permanent members of the UN security council in February 2012. He

said that during those discussions, the Russian ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, laid out a three-point plan, which included a proposal for Assad to cede power at some point after peace talks had started between the regime and the opposition.

But he said that the US, Britain and France were so convinced that the Syrian dictator was about to fall, they ignored the proposal.

[snip]

“The most intriguing was the meeting I had with Vitaly Churkin because I know this guy,” Ahtisaari recalled. “We don’t necessarily agree on many issues but we can talk candidly. I explained what I was doing there and he said: ‘Martti, sit down and I’ll tell you what we should do.’”

“He said three things: One – we should not give arms to the opposition. Two – we should get a dialogue going between the opposition and Assad straight away. Three – we should find an elegant way for Assad to step aside.”

I’m not so sure I buy this was a real offer from Russia. Possibly it was a trial balloon designed to prove that on Syria, as on Libya, the western powers were lying about their ultimate goals being regime change (though obviously this was an offer to remove Assad, though not his regime).

China Matters has a lot to say about this disclosure, arguing that it confirms his observation in the wake of a July 17, 2012 terrorist attack on Assad that the US was probably partnering with al Qaeda. Those posts are well worth reading (and the potential roles of David Petraeus and Hillary Clinton in such a scheme – one which Obama temporarily halted in summer 2012, only to reconsider it in 2013 – are equally worth considering).

But here's the other question that must be raised from this article.

What the fuck kind of intelligence failure in 2012 had everyone in the US government believing that Assad was about to fall? I mean, I get that that was the conventional wisdom at the time (a CW China Matters rightly takes on in his post). But there were plenty of people (CM is one, Moon of Alabama another, Joshua Landis another) who were predicting Assad would be able to withstand that assault. Indeed, CM argues that Assad's ability to withstand the July 2012 decapitation strike should have been the clue.

What sources were leading both the press and US intelligence to believe Assad was going to fall?

If you buy that the Russians were willing to make a reasonable deal of some sort in 2012, then the mistaken belief Assad was about to fall has been almost as catastrophic as the intelligence failures that got us into the Iraq War in terms of deaths and dislocation. They've been far more damaging, at least thus far, than cooked intelligence on ISIS. That bad intelligence likely comes the same vicinity as the intelligence that said we could insert a small group of fighters in al Nusra's vicinity without the al Qaeda affiliate responding.

Admittedly, it's likely there has been some internal accountability for this intelligence failure. David Petraeus probably could have withstood sharing code word intelligence with his mistress, after all. And Bandar bin Sultan, who surely was in charge of this effort, lost the Saudi intelligence portfolio.

But it is likely we're taking advice from the same people as we did then, with the same disastrous consequences. Which go far beyond fluffing US success against ISIS.