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U.S. Foreign Policy in Syria: Sleepwalking to Another Mideast Disaster

By Robert Parry

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If sanity ruled U.S. foreign policy, American diplomats would be pushing frantically for serious power-sharing negotiations between Syria's secular government and whatever rational people remain in the opposition – and then hope that the combination could turn back the military advances of the Islamic State and/or Al-Qaeda's Nusra Front.

But sanity doesn't rule. Instead, the ever-influential neocons and their liberal-hawk allies can't get beyond the idea of a U.S. military campaign to destroy President Bashar al-Assad's army and force "regime change" – even if the almost certain outcome would be the black flag of Islamic nihilism flying over Damascus.

As much as one may criticize the neocons for their reckless scheming, you can't call them fickle. Once they come up with an idea – no matter how hare-brained – they stick with it. Syrian "regime change" has been near the top of their to-do list since the mid-1990s and they aren't about to let it go now. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Mysterious Why of the Iraq War](#)."]]

That's one reason why – if you read recent New York Times stories by correspondent Anne Barnard – no matter how they start, they will wind their way to a conclusion that President Barack Obama must bomb Assad's forces, somehow conflating Assad's secular government with the success of the fundamentalist Islamic State.



U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on Aug. 30, 2013, claims to have proof that the Syrian government was responsible for a chemical weapons attack on Aug. 21, but that evidence failed to materialize or was later discredited. [State Department photo]

On Wednesday, Barnard published, on the front page, fact-free allegations that Assad was in cahoots with the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL) in its offensive near Aleppo, thus suggesting that both Assad's forces and the Islamic State deserved to be targets of U.S. bombing attacks inside Syria. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[NYT's New Propaganda on Syria](#)."]]

On Thursday, Barnard was back on the front page co-authoring [an analysis](#) favorably citing the views of political analyst Ibrahim Hamidi, arguing that the only way to blunt the political appeal of the Islamic State is to take "more forceful international action against the Syrian president" – code words for "regime change."

But Barnard lamented,

"Mr. Assad remains in power, backed by Iran and the militant group Hezbollah. ... That, Mr. Hamidi and other analysts said, has left some Sunnis willing to tolerate the Islamic State in areas

where they lack another defender. ... By attacking ISIS in Syria while doing nothing to stop Mr. Assad from bombing Sunni areas that have rebelled, he added, the United States-led campaign was driving some Syrians into the Islamic State camp.”

In other words, if one follows Barnard’s logic, the United States should expand its military strikes inside Syria to include attacks on the Syrian government’s forces, even though they have been the primary obstacle to the conquest of Syria by Al-Qaeda’s Nusra Front and/or Al-Qaeda’s spinoff, the Islamic State. (Another unprofessional thing about Barnard’s articles is that they don’t bother to seek out what the Syrian government thinks or to get the regime’s response to accusations.)

The Sarin Story

So, “regime change” remains the neocon prescription for Syria, one that was almost fulfilled in summer 2013 after a mysterious sarin gas attack on Aug. 21, 2013, outside Damascus – that the U.S. government and mainstream media rushed to blame on Assad, although some U.S. intelligence analysts suspected early on that it was a provocation by rebel extremists.

According to intelligence sources, that suspicion of a rebel “false-flag” operation has gained more credence inside the U.S. intelligence community although the Director of National Intelligence refuses to provide an update beyond the sketchy “government assessment” that was issued nine days after the incident, blaming Assad’s forces but presenting no verifiable evidence.

Because DNI James Clapper has balked at refining or correcting the initial rush to judgment, senior U.S. officials and the mainstream media have been spared the embarrassment of having to retract their initial claims – and they also are free to continue accusing Assad. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[A Fact-Resistant Group Think on Syria](#).”]

Yet, the DNI’s refusal to update the nine-days-after-the-attack white paper undermines any hope of getting serious about power-sharing negotiations between Assad and his “moderate” opponents. It may be fun to repeat accusations about Assad “gassing his own people,” a reprise of a favorite line used against Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, but it leaves little space for talks.

There has been a similar problem in the DNI’s stubbornness about revealing what the U.S. intelligence community has learned about the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 shoot-down over eastern Ukraine killing 298 people on July 17, 2014. DNI Clapper released a hasty report five days after the tragedy, citing mostly “social media” and pointing the blame at ethnic Russian rebels and the Russian government.

Though I’m told that U.S intelligence analysts have vastly expanded their understanding of what happened and who was responsible, the Obama administration has refused to release the information, letting stand the public perception that Russian President Vladimir Putin was somehow at fault. That, in turn, has limited Putin’s willingness to cooperate fully with Obama on

strategies for reining in hard-charging crises in the Middle East and elsewhere. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[US Intel Stands Pat on MH-17 Shoot-down](#)."]]

From the Russian perspective, Putin feels he is being falsely accused of mass murder even as Obama seeks his help on Syria, Iran and other hotspots. As U.S. president, Obama could order the U.S. intelligence community to declassify what it has learned about both incidents, the 2013 sarin gas attack in Syria and the 2014 MH-17 shoot-down in eastern Ukraine, but he won't.

Instead, the Obama administration has used these propaganda clubs to continue pounding on Assad and Putin – and Obama's team shows no willingness to put down the clubs even if they were fashioned from premature or wrongheaded analyses. While Obama withholds the facts, the neocons and liberal hawks are leading the American people to the cliffs of two potentially catastrophic wars in Syria and Ukraine.

Though Obama claims that his administration is committed to "transparency," the reality is that it has been one of the most opaque in American history, made much worse by his unprecedented prosecution of national security whistleblowers.

Even in the propaganda-crazy days of the Reagan administration, I found it easier to consult with intelligence analysts than I do now. While those Reagan-era analysts might have had orders to spin me, they also would give up some valuable insights in the process. Today, there is much more fear among analysts that they might stray an inch too far and get prosecuted.

The danger from Obama's elitist – and manipulative – attitude toward information is that it eviscerates the American people's fundamental right to know what is going on in the world and thus denies them a meaningful say in matters of war or peace.

This problem is made worse by a mainstream U.S. news media that marches in lockstep with neoconservatives and their "liberal interventionist" sidekicks, narrowing the permitted policy options and guiding an enfeebled public to a preordained conclusion – as New York Times correspondent Anne Barnard has done over the past two days.

In the case of Syria, the only "acceptable" approach is the reckless idea that the U.S. government must militarily damage the principal force – the Syrian army – that is holding back the rising tide of Sunni terrorism and then must take its chances on what comes next.