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A Comedy of Terrors

By Jeffrey St. Clair
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Poor ISIS. Try as they might, the men in black still can't out-terrorize their enemies or, more pointedly, even their patrons. For the past three years, decapitations have served as the money shots for ISIS's theater of cruelty. Then on New Year's Day the Saudis upstaged ISIS by audaciously chopping off the heads of 47 men, including a prominent Shia cleric.

This act of brazen butchery is made all the more horrific by virtue of the fact that the Saudi head-slicers recently landed a seat on the UN Human Rights Council, largely at the insistence of British Prime Minister David Cameron, who personally vouched for the petro-autocracy's acute sensitivity to matters of civil liberties and the humane treatment of prisoners. Then again the drone-troika of Britain, France and the U.S. also enjoy seats on the council, so perhaps the Saudis have earned their slot after all.

With his peculiar fondness for porcine heads, Cameron is probably the Kingdom's most un-kosher ally, but he is far from Saudi Arabia's only political cheerleader. Showing a stunning lack of judgment, Comandante Bernie Sanders says his Syrian strategy relies on the Saudis taking the lead in the fight against ISIS. "They've got to get their hands dirty," Sanders inveighed to Wolf Blitzer on CNN. "They've got to get their troops on the ground. They've got to win that war with our support. We cannot be leading the effort."

Apparently Sanders skipped the briefing on how ISIS's apocalyptic ideology has been fueled by fire-breathing Wahhabi preachers financed by the Saudi royal family. The red senator also seems

ignorant of the fact that ISIS functions as shock troops for the House of Saud in its proxy war against Iran, now raging in Yemen and Iraq, as well as Syria. You'd think that Bernie would be getting better advice from his friends in Israeli intelligence.

Sanders' policy on Syria is naïve to the point of doltishness. But Hillary's Syrian war plan—shared by most of her Republican rivals—borders on the pathological. Having not missed a minute of sleep haunted by the corpses of Libya, Mrs. Clinton is now stumping for the dismantling of Syria, using the carefully cultivated domestic anxiety over ISIS as the pretext. The cornerstone of Hillary's rogue scheme is the imposition of a no fly zone over that embattled country.

Sounds like a relatively benign plan, right? But wait. ISIS doesn't have an air force. They don't even have a drone. Russia, of course, *is* flying daily sorties in Syrian air space, at the invitation of the Syrian government, such as it is, and some kind of confrontation would be inevitable. Still, Hillary doesn't flinch. She has zealously vowed to shoot down *any* Russian plane that violated her unilateral ban.

Yet NATO's latest recruit, Turkey, jumped the gun. Erdogan's trigger-happy generals didn't wait for any such fanciful legalisms and downed a Russian jet for momentarily breaching (perhaps) Turkish airspace. Then Turkmen fighters gleefully trained their machine-guns on the plane's pilots as they slowly parachuted toward the desert. Vladimir Putin fulminated boisterously to his domestic audience, but prudently declined to retaliate against the Turks, perhaps intuiting that it would snap a tripwire for a full-frontal confrontation with NATO.

Everyone has been consulted about the future of Syria, except the Syrians themselves. Why? Because simply, Syrians don't matter. They are quite beside the point. Thanks to fresh reporting by Seymour Hersh, we now know that the subtext for Obama administration's Syrian strategy, dating back to Clinton's tenure at the State Department, has been largely geared toward ensnaring Russia in the Levantine quagmire. This is chaos theory marketed as foreign policy.

The rubble of modern Syria has become a multi-national bombing range, a kill zone of neo-Cold War contention. Each new act of domestic terrorism, from Paris to San Bernardino, has been used to rationalize more airstrikes on Syria, even though the killers in both slaughters seemed mainly to be attempting to impress the terror network, which is like blaming Jodie Foster for *inspiring* John Hinkley's wild fusillade at Reagan and his entourage.

Even Putin, that prickly hero to some precincts of the anti-imperialist Left, has upped the ante by threatening to launch a nuclear strike against ISIS in response to the bombing of a Russian passenger plane over the Sinai, even though there's no direct evidence that the bomb was planted by the mad men of Daesh. Not to be outdone, Ted Cruz, the natural-born Canadian, has vowed to make the sands of Raqqa glow, despite the fact that few Americans could point to Raqqa on a map or explain why this city of a quarter-million people should be incinerated in retribution for the murderous rampage by the Bonnie and Clyde of San Berdoo.

The war on terror has exploded in the face of the West, with spreading mayhem across the Middle East and unraveling conditions on the home front. One chilling measure of the savage

toll from 14 years of war is the rate of military suicides in the US, which now total more than 4000 since the first cruise missiles struck Afghanistan. There is a desperate motive to externalize the blame for this bleak situation, to target a scapegoat. The rancid resumes of ISIS and the despotic Assad regime make Syria a convenient landscape for more imperial bloodletting. There's not even the faintest flicker of an anti-war movement left to impede their shameful enterprise.

In this comedy of terrors, the apex predators are the familiar ones circling overhead, waiting to blow Syria apart and plunder its bones.