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The Anti-Empire Report

by William Blum
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Syria, the story thus far

"Today, many Americans are asking — indeed I ask myself," Hillary Clinton said, "how can this happen? How can this happen in a country we helped liberate, in a city we helped save from destruction? This question reflects just how complicated, and at times, how confounding the world can be." 1

The Secretary of State was referring to the attack on the American consulate in Benghazi, Libya September 11 that killed the US ambassador and three other Americans. US intelligence agencies have now stated that the attackers had ties to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.2

Yes, the world can indeed be complicated and confounding. But we have learned a few things. The United States began blasting Libya with missiles with the full knowledge that they were fighting on the same side as the al-Qaeda types. Benghazi was and is the headquarters for Muslim fundamentalists of various stripes in North Africa. However, it's incorrect to claim that the United States (aka NATO) saved the city from destruction. The story of the "imminent" invasion of Benghazi by Moammar Gaddafi's forces last year was only propaganda to justify Western intervention. And now the United States is intervening — at present without actual gunfire, as far as is known — against the government of Syria, with the full knowledge that they're again on the same side as the al-Qaeda types. A rash of suicide bombings against Syrian

government targets is sufficient by itself to dispel any doubts about that. And once again, the United States is participating in the overthrow of a secular Mideast government.

At the same time, the Muslim fundamentalists in Syria, as in Libya, can have no illusions that America loves them. A half century of US assaults on Mideast countries, the establishment of American military bases in the holy land of Saudi Arabia, and US support for dictatorships and for Israel's genocide against the Palestinians have relieved them of such fanciful thoughts. So why is the United States looking to forcefully intervene once again? A tale told many times — world domination, oil, Israel, ideology, etc. Assad of Syria, like Gaddafi of Libya, has shown little promise as a reliable client state so vital to the American Empire.

It's only the barrier set up by Russia and China on the UN Security Council that keeps NATO (aka the United States) from unleashing thousands of airborne missiles to "liberate" Syria as they did Libya. Russian and Chinese leaders claim that they were misled about Libya by the United States, that all they had agreed to was enforcing a "no-fly zone", not seven months of almost daily missile attacks against the land and people of Libya. Although it's very fortunate that the two powers refuse to give the US another green light, it's difficult to believe that they were actually deceived last spring in regard to Libya. NATO doesn't do peacekeeping or humanitarian interventions; it does war; bloody, awful war; and regime change. And they would undoubtedly be itching to show off their specialty in Syria — perhaps even without Security Council blessing — except that NATO and the US always prefer to attack people who are exceptionally defenseless, and Syria has ballistic missile capabilities and chemical weapons.

It's likely that the American elections also serve to keep Obama from expanding the US role in Syria. He may have concluded that there are more votes in the Democratic Party base for peace this time than for waging war against his eighth (sic) country.

The propaganda bias in the Western media has been extreme. Day after day, month after month, we've been told of Syrian government attacks, using horrible means, almost invariably with the victims described as unarmed civilians; without any proof, often without any logic, that it was actually the government behind a particular attack, with the story's source turning out to be an anti-government organization; rarely informing us of similar behavior on the part of the rebel forces. In May, the BBC included pictures of mass graves in Iraq in their coverage of an alleged Syrian government massacre in Houla, Syria. The station later apologized for the pictures saying that they had been submitted to the BBC by a rebel group.³ On June 7, Germany's leading daily, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, citing opponents of Assad, reported that the Houla massacre was in fact committed by anti-Assad Sunni militants, and that the bulk of the victims were members of the Alawi and Shia minorities, which have been largely supportive of Assad.

According to a report of Stratfor, the private and conservative American intelligence firm with high-level connections, many of whose emails were obtained by Wikileaks: "most of the [Syrian] opposition's more serious claims have turned out to be grossly exaggerated or simply untrue." They claimed "that regime forces besieged Homs and imposed a 72-hour deadline for Syrian defectors to surrender themselves and their weapons or face a potential massacre." That news made international headlines. Stratfor's investigation, however, found "no signs of a massacre", and warned that "opposition forces have an interest in portraying an impending massacre, hoping

to mimic the conditions that propelled a foreign military intervention in Libya." Stratfor then stated that any suggestions of massacres were unlikely because the Syrian "regime has calibrated its crackdowns to avoid just such a scenario ... that could lead to an intervention based on humanitarian grounds."⁴

Democracy Now — long a standard of progressive radio-TV news — has been almost as bad as CNN and al Jazeera (the latter owned by Qatar, an active military participant in both Libya and Syria). The heavy bias of Democracy Now in this area goes back to the very beginning of the Arab Spring. The program made some unfortunate choices in its mideast news correspondents, seemingly only because they spoke Arabic and/or had contacts in the region. Where have you gone Amy Goodman? RT (Russia Today) has stood almost alone amongst English-language television news sources in offering an alternative to the official Western line.

Michel Chossudovsky of Global Research, notes that "Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and now Syria are but a sequence of stops on a global roadmap of permanent war that also swings through Iran. Russia and China are the terminal targets." When the Syrian government is overthrown — and in all likelihood the Western forces will not relent until that happens — the al Qaeda types will be dominant in the Syrian version of Benghazi. The American ambassador would be well advised to not visit.

Can you believe that I almost feel sorry for the American military?

In Afghanistan, the US military has tried training sessions, embedded cultural advisers, recommended reading lists, and even a video game designed to school American troops in local custom. But 11 years into the war, NATO troops and Afghan soldiers are still beset by a dangerous lack of cultural awareness, officials say, contributing to a string of attacks by Afghan police and soldiers against their military partners. Fifty-one coalition troops have been killed this year by their Afghan counterparts. While some insider attacks have been attributed to Taliban infiltrators, military officials say the majority stem from personal disputes and misunderstandings.

So the Afghan army is trying something new, most likely with American input: a guide to the strange ways of the American soldier. The goal is to convince Afghan troops that when their Western counterparts do something deeply insulting, it's likely a product of cultural ignorance and not worthy of revenge. The pamphlet they've produced includes the following advice: "Please do not get offended if you see a NATO member blowing his/her nose in front of you." "When Coalition members get excited, they may show their excitement by patting one another on the back or the behind. They may even do this to you if they are proud of the job you've done. Once again, they don't mean to offend you."

"When someone feels comfortable in your presence, they may even put their feet on their own desk while speaking with you. They are by no means trying to offend you. They simply don't know or have forgotten the Afghan custom." (Pointing the soles of one's shoes at someone is considered a grievous insult in Afghanistan.)

The guide also warns Afghan soldiers that Western troops might wink at them or inquire about

their female relatives or expose their private parts while showering — all inappropriate actions by Afghan standards.⁵

Hmmm. I wonder if the manual advises telling Afghan soldiers that urinating on dead Afghan bodies, cutting off fingers, and burning the Koran are all nothing more than good ol' Yankee customs, meaning no offense of course.

And does it point out that no Afghan should be insulted by being tortured in an American military prison since the same is done at home to American prisoners.

Most importantly, the Afghan people must be made to understand that bombing them, invading them, and occupying them for 11 years are all for their own good. It's called "freedom and democracy".

I almost feel sorry for the American military in Afghanistan. As I've written about the US soldiers in Iraq, they're "can-do" Americans, accustomed to getting their way, habituated to thinking of themselves as the best, expecting the world to share that sentiment, and they're frustrated as hell, unable to figure out "why they hate us", why we can't win them over, why we can't at least wipe them out. Don't they want freedom and democracy? ... They're can-do Americans, using good ol' American know-how and Madison Avenue savvy, sales campaigns, public relations, advertising, selling the US brand, just like they do it back home; employing media experts, psychologists, even anthropologists ... and nothing helps. And how can it if the product you're selling is toxic, inherently, from birth, if you're ruining your customers' lives, with no regard for any kind of law or morality, health or environment. They're can-do Americans, used to playing by the rules — theirs; and they're frustrated as hell.

In case you're distressed about the possibility of a Romney-Ryan government, here's some good news:

There are many people in the United States who are reluctant to be active against US foreign policy, or even seriously criticize it, because a Democrat is in the White House, a man promising lots of hope and change. Some of them, however, might become part of the anti-war movement if a Republican were in the White House, even though pursuing the same foreign policy. And we can be sure the policy would be the same for there's no difference between the two parties when it comes to foreign policy. There's simply no difference, period, though each party changes its rhetoric a bit depending on whether it's in the White House or on the outside looking in.

Similarly, the movement for a national single-payer health insurance program has been set back because of President Obama. His health program is like prescribing an aspirin for cancer, but the few baby steps the program takes toward bringing the United States into the 21st century amongst developed nations is enough to keep many American health-care activists content for the time being, especially with Obama facing a tough election. They are satisfied with so little. With a Republican in the White House, however, there might be a resurgence of a more militant health-care activism.

Moreover, if the Republicans had been in power the past three years and done EXACTLY what Obama has done in the sphere of civil liberties and human rights, many Obamaites would have

no problem calling the United States by its right name: a police state. I mean that literally. Not the worst police state in the history of the world. Not even the worst police state in the world today. But, nonetheless, a police state. Just read the news each day, carefully.

Sam Smith, editor of the Progressive Review, has written: "Barack Obama is the most conservative Democratic president we've ever had. In an earlier time, there would have been a name for him: Republican."

Oh but there's Social Security and Medicare, you say. Can Romney be trusted to not make serious cuts to these vital programs? His choice of running mate, Paul Ryan, is practically a poster child for such cuts.

Well, can Obama be trusted to not make such cuts? Consider this recent comment in the New York Times: "[Obama] particularly believes that Democrats do not receive enough credit for their willingness to accept cuts in Medicare and Social Security." 6

As somebody once said, the United States doesn't need a third party. It needs a second party.

The only important cause that might significantly benefit from a Democratic administration is appointments to the Supreme Court, if there is in fact an opening. But does this fully override the benefits of Obama being out of office as outlined above?

Dear Reader: I truthfully do not want to be so cynical. Despite the quips, it's not really fun. But how else can one react to the Republicans and Democrats given their behavior at their recent conventions? If they can so obviously ignore the wishes of their own delegates, what can the average American citizen expect? Have a look at these remarkable scenes caught on video or read this account of the voice votes at the recent conventions.

How many voters does it take to change a light bulb?

None. Because voters can't change anything.

So what to do?

As I've said before: Inasmuch as I can't see violent revolution succeeding in the United States (something deep inside tells me that we couldn't quite match the government's firepower, not to mention its viciousness), I can offer no solution to stopping the imperial beast other than this: Educate yourself and as many others as you can, raising their political and ideological consciousness, providing them with the factual ammunition and arguments needed to sway others, increasing the number of those in the opposition until it raises the political price for those in power, until it reaches a critical mass, at which point ... I can't predict the form the explosion will take or what might be the trigger ... But you have to have faith. And courage.

Some further thoughts on American elections and democracy:

Richard Reeves: "The American political system is essentially a contract between the Republican

and Democratic parties, enforced by federal and state two-party laws, all designed to guarantee the survival of both no matter how many people despise or ignore them."

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832): "In politics, as on the sickbed, people toss from one side to the other, thinking they will be more comfortable."

Alexander Cockburn: "There was a time once when 'lesser of two evils' actually meant something momentous, like the choice between starving to death on a lifeboat, or eating the first mate."

U.N. Human Development Report, 1993: "Elections are a necessary, but certainly not a sufficient, condition for democracy. Political participation is not just a casting of votes. It is a way of life."

Gore Vidal: "How to get people to vote against their interests and to really think against their interests is very clever. It's the cleverest ruling class that I have ever come across in history. It's been 200 years at it. It's superb."

Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius: "The opinion of 10,000 men is of no value if none of them know anything about the subject."

Michael Parenti: "As demonstrated in Russia and numerous other countries, when faced with a choice between democracy without capitalism or capitalism without democracy, Western elites unhesitatingly embrace the latter."