

Airline Horror Spurs New Rush to Judgment

Exclusive: President Obama and the State Department's "anti-diplomats" are fanning flames of anger against Russia after the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over Ukraine. But some U.S. intelligence analysts doubt the popular "blame-the-Russians" scenario, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Despite doubts within the U.S. intelligence community, the Obama administration and the mainstream U.S. news media are charging off toward another rush to judgment blaming Ukrainian rebels and the Russian government for the shoot-down of a Malaysia Airlines plane, much as occurred last summer regarding a still-mysterious sarin gas attack in Syria.

In both cases, rather than let independent investigators sort out the facts, President Barack Obama's ever-aggressive State Department and the major U.S. media simply accepted that the designated villains of those two crises Bashar al-Assad in Syria and Russian President Vladimir Putin on Ukraine were the guilty parties. Yet, some U.S. intelligence analysts dissented from both snap conventional wisdoms.

Regarding the shoot-down of the Malaysian jetliner on Thursday, I'm told that some CIA analysts cite U.S. satellite reconnaissance photos suggesting that the anti-aircraft missile that brought down Flight 17 was fired by Ukrainian troops from a government battery, not by ethnic Russian rebels who have been resisting the regime in Kiev since elected President Viktor Yanukovich was overthrown on Feb. 22.

According to a source briefed on the tentative findings, the soldiers manning the battery appeared to be wearing Ukrainian uniforms and may have been drinking, since what looked like beer bottles were scattered around the site. But the source added that the information was still incomplete and the analysts did not rule out the possibility of rebel responsibility.

A contrary emphasis has been given to the Washington Post and other mainstream U.S. outlets. On Saturday, the Post reported that "on Friday, U.S. officials said a preliminary intelligence assessment indicated the airliner was blown up by an SA-11 surface-to-air missile fired by the separatists." But the objectivity of the Obama administration, which has staunchly supported the coup regime, is in question as are the precise reasons for its judgments.

Even before the Feb. 22 coup, senior administration officials, including

Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt, were openly encouraging protesters seeking the overthrow of Yanukovich. Nuland went so far as to pass out cookies to the demonstrators and discuss with Pyatt who should be appointed once Yanukovich was removed.

After Yanukovich and his officials were forced to flee in the face of mass protests and violent attacks by neo-Nazi militias, the State Department was quick to declare the new government "legitimate" and welcomed Nuland's favorite, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, as the new prime minister.

As events have unfolded since then, including Crimea's secession to join Russia and bloody attacks directed at ethnic Russians in Odessa and elsewhere, the Obama administration has consistently taken the side of the Kiev regime and bashed Moscow.

And, since Thursday, when the Malaysian plane was shot down killing 298 people, the Ukrainian government and the Obama administration have pointed the finger of blame at the rebels and the Russian government, albeit without the benefit of a serious investigation that is only now beginning.

One of the administration's points has been that the Buk anti-aircraft missile system, which was apparently used to shoot down the plane, was "Russian made." But the point is rather silly since nearly all Ukrainian military weaponry is "Russian made." Ukraine, after all, was part of the Soviet Union until 1991 and has continued to use mostly Russian military equipment.

It's also not clear how the U.S. government ascertained that the missile was an SA-11 as opposed to other versions of the Buk missile system.

Slanting the Case

Virtually everything that U.S. officials have said appears designed to tilt suspicions toward the Russians and the rebels and away from government forces. Referring ominously to the sophistication of the SA-11, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power declared, "We cannot rule out Russian technical assistance." But that phrasing supposedly means that the administration can't rule it in either.

Still, in reading between the lines of the mainstream U.S. press accounts, it's possible to see where some of the gaps are regarding the supposed Russian hand in Thursday's tragedy. For instance, the Post's Craig Whitlock reported that Air Force Gen. Philip M. Breedlove, U.S. commander of NATO forces in Europe, said last month that "We have not seen any of the [Russian] air-defense vehicles across the border yet."

Since these Buk missile systems are large and must be transported on trucks, it would be difficult to conceal their presence from U.S. aerial surveillance which has been concentrating intensely on the Ukraine-Russia border in recent months.

The Post also reported that "Rear Adm. John Kirby, the Pentagon press secretary, said defense officials could not point to specific evidence that an SA-11 surface-to-air missile system had been transported from Russia into eastern Ukraine."

In other words, the mystery is still not solved. It may be that the rebels facing heavy bombardment from the Ukrainian air force convinced the Russians to provide more advanced anti-aircraft weapons than the shoulder-fired missiles that the rebels have used to bring down some Ukrainian military planes.

It's possible, too, that a rebel detachment mistook the civilian airliner for a military plane or even that someone in the Russian military launched the fateful rocket at the plane heading toward Russian airspace.

But both the Russian government and the rebels dispute those scenarios. The rebels say they don't have missiles that can reach the 33,000-foot altitude of the Malaysian airliner. Besides denying a hand in the tragedy, the Russians claim that the Ukrainian military did have Buk anti-aircraft systems in eastern Ukraine and that the radar of one battery was active on the day of the crash.

The Russian Defense Ministry stated that "The Russian equipment detected throughout July 17 the activity of a Kupol radar, deployed as part of a Buk-M1 battery near Styła [a village some 30 kilometers south of Donetsk]," according to [an RT report](#).

So, the other alternative remains in play, that a Ukrainian military unit possibly a poorly supervised bunch fired the missile intentionally or by accident. Why the Ukrainian military would intentionally have aimed at a plane flying eastward toward Russia is hard to comprehend, however.

A Propaganda Replay?

But perhaps the larger point is that both the Obama administration and the U.S. press corps should stop this pattern of rushing to judgments. It's as if they're obsessed with waging "information warfare" i.e., justifying hostilities toward some adversarial nation rather than responsibly informing the American people.

We saw this phenomenon in 2002-03 as nearly the entire Washington press corps clambered onboard President George W. Bush's propaganda bandwagon into an aggressive war against Iraq. That pattern almost repeated itself last summer when a similar rush to judgment occurred around a sarin gas attack outside

Damascus, Syria, on Aug. 21.

Though the evidence was murky, there was a stampede to assume that the Assad government was behind the attack. While blaming the Syrian army, the U.S. press ignored the possibility that the attack was a provocation committed by radical jihadist rebels who were hoping that U.S. air power could turn the tide of the war in their favor.

Rather than carefully weigh the complex evidence, the State Department and Secretary of State John Kerry tried to spur President Obama into a quick decision to bomb Syrian government targets. Kerry delivered a belligerent speech on Aug. 30 and the administration released what it called a "Government Assessment" supposedly proving the case.

But this four-page white paper contained no verifiable evidence supporting its accusations and it soon became clear that the report had excluded dissents that some U.S. intelligence analysts would have attached to a more formal paper prepared by the intelligence community.

Despite the war hysteria then gripping Official Washington, President Obama rejected war at the last moment and with the help of Russian President Putin was able to negotiate a resolution of the crisis in which Assad surrendered Syria's chemical weapons while still denying a hand in the sarin gas attack.

The mainstream U.S. press, especially the New York Times, and some non-governmental organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, continued pushing the theme of the Syrian government's guilt. HRW and the Times teamed up for a major story that purported to show the flight paths of two sarin-laden missiles vectoring back to a Syrian military base 9.5 kilometers away.

For a time, this report was treated as the slam-dunk evidence proving the case against Assad, until it turned out that only one of the rockets carried sarin and the maximum range of the one that did have sarin was only about two kilometers.

Despite knowing these weaknesses in the case, President Obama stood by his State Department hawks by reading a speech to the UN General Assembly on Sept. 24 in which he declared: "It's an insult to human reason and to the legitimacy of this institution to suggest that anyone other than the regime carried out this attack."

In watching Obama's address, I was struck by how casually he lied. He knew better than almost anyone that some of his senior intelligence analysts were among those doubting the Syrian government's guilt. Yet, he suggested that anyone who wasn't onboard the propaganda train was crazy.

Since then, investigative journalist Seymour Hersh has revealed other evidence indicating that the sarin attack may indeed have been a rebel provocation meant to push Obama over the “red line” that he had drawn about not tolerating chemical weapons use.

Now, we are seeing a repeat performance in which Obama understands the doubts about the identity of who fired the missile that brought down the Malaysian airliner but is pushing the suspicions in a way designed to whip up animosity toward Russia and President Putin.

Obama may think this is a smart play because he can posture as tough when many of his political enemies portray him as weak. He also buys himself some P.R. protection in case it turns out that the ethnic Russian rebels and/or the Russian military do share the blame for the tragedy. He can claim to have been out front in making the accusations.

But there is a dangerous downside to creating a public hysteria about nuclear-armed Russia. As we have seen already in Ukraine, events can spiral out of control in unpredictable ways.

Assistant Secretary Nuland and other State Department hawks probably thought they were building their careers when they encouraged the Feb. 22 coup and they may well be right about advancing their status in Official Washington at least. But they also thawed out long-frozen animosities between the “ethnically pure” Ukrainians in the west and the ethnic Russians in the east.

Those tensions many dating back to World War II and before have now become searing hatreds with hundreds of dead on both sides. The nasty, little Ukrainian civil war also made Thursday’s horror possible.

But even greater calamities could lie ahead if the State Department’s “anti-diplomats” succeed in reigniting the Cold War. The crash of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 should be a warning about the dangers of international brinkmanship.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America’s Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, click here.

Why an Iran-Nuke Deal Could Succeed

U.S. hardliners still dream about “regime change” in Iran and thus want more sanctions rather than a deal that would constrain Iran’s nuclear energy program but the Obama administration has found that talks can work if Iran’s independence is respected, say Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett.

By Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett

While negotiators from Iran, the United States and the rest of the P5+1 will not meet their July 20 target for a comprehensive nuclear agreement, it is clear they won’t walk away from the table in a huff. So, as the parties prepare to continue the process, what has America learned from negotiating with Iran, and what does it still need to learn to close a final deal?

One thing Washington has learned is that the Islamic Republic is deeply committed to protecting Iran’s independence. Thirty-five years ago, Iran’s current political order was born of a revolution promising Iranians to end subordination of their country’s foreign policy to the dictates of outside powers, especially the United States.

Since then, the Islamic Republic has worked hard to keep that promise, for example, by defending Iran against a U.S.-backed, eight-year war of aggression by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and fending off a steady stream of U.S. and Israeli covert attacks, economic warfare and threats of overt military action.

On nuclear matters, the Islamic Republic’s commitment to protecting Iranian independence focuses on the proposition that Iran has a sovereign right, recognized in the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), to enrich uranium indigenously under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards.

The Islamic Republic terminated the purely weapons-related aspects of the U.S.-supplied nuclear program it inherited from the last shah, going so far as to reconfigure the Tehran Research Reactor, which, when transferred by the United States in the 1960s, only ran on fuel enriched to weapons-grade levels (over 90 percent), to use fuel enriched to just below 20 percent.

But the Islamic Republic has also been determined to develop a range of civil nuclear capabilities, including indigenous enrichment for peaceful purposes. It won’t surrender Iran’s right to do so, even in the face of massive U.S. and Western pressure and sanctions. Beyond sovereignty and practical needs, Iranian policy makers judge that appeasing Washington on the issue will simply lead to more aggressive U.S. demands and pressure on other disputes.

America may have begun to recognize that respecting Iranian independence is key to diplomatic progress. For over a decade, Washington has insisted, contrary to how the vast majority of states read the NPT and to America's own publicly stated view during the Treaty's early years, that Iran has no right to enrich. Even today, while Secretary of State John Kerry acknowledges Iran's right to a "peaceful nuclear program," the United States refuses to acknowledge that this includes a right to safeguarded enrichment.

However, when Washington has moved, in practical ways, to accept safeguarded Iranian enrichment, Tehran has responded positively. In the Joint Plan of Action agreed last November, America and its British and French partners dropped their longstanding demands that Iran cease all enrichment-related activities before substantial diplomatic progress would be possible.

Furthermore, the United States and the rest of the P5+1 agreed that a final deal would encompass an Iranian enrichment program. In return, Tehran made multiple commitments to diminish what America and its Western partners portray as the proliferation risks of Iran's nuclear activities.

These confidence-building measures, which, the IAEA reports, Iran has scrupulously implemented, include stopping enrichment at the near-20 percent level needed for TRR fuel, converting part of its near-20 percent stockpile to oxide form and diluting fissile-isotope purity in the rest, freezing its centrifuge infrastructure and accepting IAEA monitoring well beyond NPT requirements.

While U.S. officials have started to grasp the importance of respecting Iran's independence, they have yet to draw this insight's full implications, the main reason a final deal isn't at hand.

America and its Western partners continue demanding that Iran dismantle most of its safeguarded centrifuge infrastructure, a demand with no basis in the NPT or any other legal instrument and which contributes nothing to Western powers' purported nonproliferation goals.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has made clear that, in a final deal, Iran could agree to cap temporarily the scope and level of its enrichment activities and to operate its centrifuges in ways rendering alleged scenarios of rapid "breakout" implausible (e.g., no stockpiling of low-enriched uranium).

Unfortunately, Western demands for dismantlement appear grounded in a determination that Tehran must "surrender" in a final deal, to forego sustainable indigenous enrichment capabilities and instead rely on foreign fuel suppliers (especially Russia). If Western powers insist that Iran compromise its

sovereign rights, there will be no final deal, no matter how long talks are extended.

The United States also still needs to learn, however incomprehensible this may seem to some, that the Islamic Republic is, in fact, a legitimate order for the overwhelming majority of Iranians living inside their country.

Besides restoring Iranian independence, the revolution that produced the Islamic Republic promised Iranians to replace externally imposed autocracy with an indigenously created system, grounded in participatory Islamist governance. For 35 years, this is what the Islamic Republic has offered Iranians the chance to build.

With all its flaws, the Islamic Republic has delivered for its people in important ways, including impressive (and progressive) developmental outcomes in poverty alleviation, educational access, health-care delivery, scientific and technological advancement, and improving the status of women, despite decades of war, threats of war, and intensifying sanctions.

Still, many American elites persist in depicting the Islamic Republic as a system so despised by its own people as to be chronically in danger of overthrow, a fantasy that has driven Western enthusiasm and not-so-tacit support for regime change in Iran. Beyond its falsity, this misapprehension of reality continues to warp the Western approach to nuclear diplomacy with Tehran.

Beyond dictating the “acceptable” scope of Iran’s indigenous capabilities, Western powers want the limits on Iran’s nuclear activities in a final deal to apply for well over a decade. Conversations with Western officials indicate that this demand, also with no basis in the NPT or any other legal instrument, is motivated by assessments that the Islamic Republic will not last for more than ten years.

By insisting on a more-than-ten-year term, Western powers are calculating that, when a final deal expires, Iran will have a political order less committed to strategic independence. This is both foolhardy and reckless. The Islamic Republic is not about to disappear, and no truly legitimate Iranian government will compromise what the vast majority of Iranians see as their nation’s sovereign rights.

When the United States fully understands that, the nuclear issue will almost resolve itself.

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