

Treating Putin Like a Lunatic

Exclusive: Official Washington treats whatever comes out of Russian President Putin's mouth as the ravings of a lunatic, even when what he says is obviously true or otherwise makes sense, as the New York Times has demonstrated again, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

When reading the New York Times on many foreign policy issues, it doesn't take a savant to figure out what the newspaper's bias is. Anything, for instance, relating to Russian President Vladimir Putin drips of contempt and hostility.

Rather than offer the Times' readers an objective or even slightly fair-minded account of Putin's remarks, we are fed a steady diet of highly prejudicial language, such as we find in Saturday's [article](#) about Putin's comments at a conference in which he noted U.S. contributions to chaos in countries, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Ukraine.

That Putin is correct appears almost irrelevant to the Times, which simply writes that Putin "unleashed perhaps his strongest diatribe against the United States yet" with his goal "to sell Moscow's view that American meddling has sparked most of the world's recent crises."

Rather than address the merits of Putin's critique, the Times' article by Neil MacFarquhar uncritically cites the "group think" of Official Washington: "Russia is often accused of provoking the crisis in Ukraine by annexing Crimea, and of prolonging the agony in Syria by helping to crush a popular uprising against President Bashar al-Assad, Moscow's last major Arab ally. Some analysts have suggested that Mr. Putin seeks to restore the lost power and influence of the Soviet Union, or even the Russian Empire, in a bid to prolong his own rule."

Yes, "some analysts" can be cited to support nearly any claim no matter how wrongheaded, or you can use the passive tense "is often accused" to present any charge no matter how unfair. But a more realistic summary of the various crises afflicting the world would note that Putin is correct when he describes past U.S. backing for various extremists, from Islamic fundamentalists in the Middle East and Central Asia to neo-Nazis in Ukraine.

For example, during the 1980s, the Reagan administration consciously encouraged Islamic fundamentalism as a strategy to cause trouble for "atheistic communism" in Afghanistan and in the Muslim provinces of the Soviet Union.

To overthrow a Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan, the CIA and its Saudi

collaborators financed the mujahedeen “holy warriors” who counted among their supporters Saudi extremist Osama bin Laden. Some of those Islamists later blended into the Taliban and al-Qaeda with dire consequences for the United States on Sept. 11, 2001.

By invading Iraq in 2003, President George W. Bush toppled a secular dictator, Saddam Hussein, but saw him replaced by what amounted to a Shiite theocracy which pushed Iraq’s Sunni minority into the arms of “Al-Qaeda in Iraq,” which has since rebranded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or simply the Islamic State. Those extremists now control large swaths of Iraq and Syria and have massacred religious minorities and Western hostages, prompting another U.S. military intervention.

Obama’s Interventions

In Libya in 2011, President Barack Obama acquiesced to demands from “liberal interventionists” in his administration and authorized an air war to overthrow another secular autocrat, Muammar Gaddafi, whose ouster and murder have sent Libya spiraling into political chaos amid warring Islamist militias. It turns out Gaddafi was not wrong when he warned of Islamist terrorists operating around Benghazi.

Similarly, Official Washington’s embrace of protests and violence aimed at removing another secular Arab leader, Syria’s Bashar al-Assad, contributed to the bloody civil war that has devastated that country and created fertile ground for the Islamic State and the Nusra Front, the official al-Qaeda affiliate.

Though Obama balked at demands from neocons and “liberal interventionists” that he launch an air war against the Syrian military in 2013, he did authorize secret shipments of weapons and training for the supposedly “moderate” Syrian rebels who have generally sided with Islamist fighters affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Many of these same neocons and “liberal interventionists” have been eager to ratchet up the confrontation with Iran over its nuclear program, including neocon dreams to “bomb, bomb, bomb Iran,” also a desire of hardliners in Israel.

In some of these crises, one of the few international leaders who has cooperated with Obama to tamp down tensions has been Putin, who helped negotiate conflict-avoiding agreements with Syria and Iran. But those peaceful interventions made Putin an inviting target for the neocons who began in fall 2013 arranging a coup d’etat in Ukraine on Russia’s border.

As Obama and Putin each paid too little attention to these maneuvers, neocons such as National Endowment for Democracy president Carl Gershman, Sen. John

McCain, R-Arizona, and Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland went to work on the Ukrainian coup.

However to actually overthrow Ukraine's elected President Viktor Yanukovich, the coup makers had to collaborate with neo-Nazi militias which were organized in western Ukraine and dispatched to Kiev where they provided the muscle for the Maidan uprising. Neo-Nazi leaders were given several ministries in the new government, and neo-Nazi militants were incorporated into the National Guard and "volunteer" militias dispatched to crush the ethnic Russian resistance in the east.

Putin for the Status Quo

The underlying reality of the Ukraine crisis was that Putin actually supported the country's status quo, i.e. maintaining the elected president and the constitutional process. It was the United States along with the European Union that sought to topple the existing system and pull Ukraine from Russia's orbit into the West's.

Whatever one thinks about the merits of that change, it is factually wrong to accuse Putin of initiating the Ukraine crisis or to extrapolate from Official Washington's false conventional wisdom and conclude that Putin is a new Hitler, an aggressor seeking to reestablish the Soviet Union or the Russian Empire.

But the Times and other major U.S. news outlets have wedded themselves to that propaganda theme and now cannot deviate from it. So, when Putin states the obvious that the U.S. has meddled in the affairs of other nations and that Russia did not pick the fight over Ukraine his comments must be treated like the ravings of a lunatic unleashing some "diatribe."

Among Putin's ranting was his observation, according to the Times article, that "the United States supports 'dubious' groups ranging from 'open neo-fascists to Islamic radicals.'

"'Why do they support such people,' he asked the annual gathering known as the Valdai Club, which met this year in the southern resort town of Sochi. 'They do this because they decide to use them as instruments along the way in achieving their goals, but then burn their fingers and recoil.'

"The goal of the United States, he said, was to try to create a unipolar world in which American interests went unchallenged.

"Mr. Putin specifically denied trying to restore the Russian Empire. He argued Russia was compelled to intervene in Ukraine because that country was in the midst of a 'civilized dialogue' over its political future when the West staged a

coup to oust the president last February, pushing the country into chaos and civil war.

“‘We did not start this,’ he said. ‘Statements that Russia is trying to reinstate some sort of empire, that it is encroaching on the sovereignty of its neighbors, are groundless.’”

Of course, all the “smart people” of Official Washington know how to react to such statements from Putin, with a snicker and a roll of the eyes. After all, they’ve been reading the narratives of these crises as fictionalized by the New York Times, the Washington Post, etc.

Rationality and realism seem to have lost any place in the workings of the mainstream U.S. news media.

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](#).

Using the Holocaust to Justify War

Since bursting onto the U.S. foreign policy stage in the 1980s, the neocons have been masters of “perception management,” devising emotional (and often false) messaging to justify aggressive war, as Maidhc Ó Cathail sees in recent Holocaust-themed propoganda against Syria’s government.

By Maidhc Ó Cathail

“The irony is that the Nazi holocaust has now become the main ideological weapon for launching wars of aggression,” Norman Finkelstein [tells](#) Yoav Shamir in “Defamation,” the Israeli filmmaker’s award-winning 2009 documentary on how perceptions of anti-Semitism affect Israeli and U.S. politics. “Every time you want to launch a war of aggression, drag in the Nazi holocaust.”

If you’re looking for evidence in support of Finkelstein’s thesis today, you need look no further than the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s [exhibit](#) of images of emaciated and mangled bodies from contemporary Syria.

The small exhibit, entitled "Genocide: The Threat Continues," features a dozen images said to be from an archive of 55,000 pictures allegedly smuggled out of the country by "Caesar," a mysterious source who claims to have defected from his job as a Syrian military photographer after having been ordered to take photos of more than 10,000 corpses.

Emphasizing the threat of an impending genocide, the reportedly conscience-stricken defector warns that a similar fate awaits the 150,000 people he says remain incarcerated by President Bashar Assad's government.

"They're powerful images, and viewers are immediately reminded of the Holocaust," Cameron Hudson, the director of the museum's Center for the Prevention of Genocide, was cited as saying in an Oct. 15 Associated Press report. Hudson, whose intriguing career in genocide prevention includes a stint as intelligence analyst in the CIA's Africa Directorate, added, "They show a side of the Syrian regime that hasn't really been really seen. You might have heard about it, read about it, but when you're confronted with these images, they're impossible to ignore."

The museum's promotion of these impossible-to-ignore, Holocaust-recalling images dates from a few months earlier, however. In his July visit to Washington that included a series of meetings with U.S. government and congressional officials, Caesar's first stop was at the Holocaust Museum.

On July 28, Michael Chertoff, a member of the museum's governing board of trustees, presented the purported defector to a small group of reporters and researchers. According to the Washington Post's Greg Miller, this event was the first time that Caesar had appeared publicly to answer questions about the photos deemed by some human rights organizations as evidence of war crimes committed by Assad.

Chertoff, a co-author of the USA PATRIOT Act, hasn't hesitated to invoke the Nazis either in support of the neoconservative-conceived "global war on terror." In an April 22, 2007 Washington Post op-ed entitled "Make No Mistake: This Is War," the then-secretary of the Department of Homeland Security wrote, "Al-Qaeda and its ilk have a world vision that is comparable to that of historical totalitarian ideologues but adapted to the 21st-century global network."

Commenting on the former DHS secretary's close ties to Israel, Jonathan Cook notes in his book Israel and the Clash of Civilizations that Chertoff's mother was an air hostess for El Al in the 1950s. "There are reports that she was involved in Operation Magic Carpet, which brought Jews to Israel from Yemen," writes the Nazareth-based British journalist. "It therefore seems possible that Livia Eisen was an Israeli national, and one with possible links to the Mossad."

Among the other members of the Holocaust Memorial Council noted for their staunch support of Israel and American interventionism are the pardoned Iran-Contra neocon intriguer Elliott Abrams and Nobel Peace Prize laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel.

Writing in Foreign Policy's The Cable on April 23, 2012, Josh Rogin drew attention to Wiesel's pointed introduction of President Barack Obama at a ceremony in the Holocaust Museum. Comparing the Syrian president and then Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the perpetrators of the Nazi holocaust, Wiesel implicitly criticized Obama's supposedly obtuse inaction, "So in this place we may ask: Have we learned anything from it? If so, how is it that Assad is still in power?"

As Rogin, a regular media conduit for anti-Assad interventionism, pointedly observed, the speech was reminiscent of another one Wiesel gave at the opening of the museum in 1993, when he urged then President Bill Clinton to take military action in Bosnia: "Similarly, that speech came at a time when the Clinton administration was resisting getting entangled in a foreign civil war but was under growing pressure to intervene."

In a revealing interview published on Aug. 11, 2013, by the Turkish newspaper Today's Zaman, Caesar's interpreter, who presided over a question-and-answer session at the museum, echoed Wiesel's criticism of President Obama's resistance to doing the bidding of the neocons and "liberal interventionists" seeking greater American intervention in Syria.

Asked by the GÃ¼len movement-aligned daily if America had forgotten the Syrian war, Mouaz Moustafa replied, "It is the President who is against action in Syria not the whole of the U.S. government. President Barack Obama has been very insular and cautious about Syria. The President does not seem to understand how important Syria is to U.S. national security [...] The President does not feel the need to explain to the American people or the world that the risks with any of the bad options that we have are far outweighed by the risks of inaction."

It is hardly a coincidence that Moustafa's rhetoric bears a striking resemblance to that of Israel's friends like Wiesel. Although one of best known media-promoted faces of the Syrian opposition in Washington has understandably sought to obscure his ties to Tel Aviv, the executive director of the Syrian Emergency Task Force has undeniable links to one of its American lobby's leading think tanks.

After it emerged that Moustafa's nonprofit had coordinated Sen. John McCain's May 2013 trip to meet with the so-called "moderate" Syrian rebels, an examination of the SETF executive director's background revealed that he was one

of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's "experts"; a contributor to WINEP's Fikra Forum, "an online community that aims to generate ideas to support Arab democrats in their struggle with authoritarians and extremists"; and had addressed the AIPAC-created think tank's annual Soref symposium entitled "Inside Syria: The Battle Against Assad's Regime."

Even more damningly, it was discovered that one of SETF's web addresses was "syriantaskforce.torahacademybr.org." The "torahacademybr.org" url belongs to the Torah Academy of Boca Raton, Florida whose key values notably include promoting "a love for and commitment to Eretz Yisroel."

When confronted with these embarrassing revelations, Moustafa responded via Twitter, "call me terrorist/Qaeda/nazi as others have but not Zionist Im [sic] denied ever entering palestine but it lives in me." Dismissing the intriguing connection to a pro-Israel yeshiva in Florida, he claimed that the "url registration was due to dumb error by web designer."

The Israel lobby-backed Moustafa also interpreted for Caesar, who was wearing dark glasses and a blue rain jacket with the hood pulled over his head, when he testified before a closed-door session of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs this July. At least some of its members would no doubt have recognized the interpreter, however.

As Foreign Policy's The Cable reported on June 6, 2013, two leaders of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Reps. Ed Royce, R-California, and Eliot Engel, D-New York, dispatched aides to Turkey to meet leading members of the Syrian Free Army between May 27 and June 3. As The Cable had learned, the meeting had been coordinated by Moustafa's Syrian Emergency Task Force.

(This September, staff from the Syrian Emergency Task Force and the House Foreign Affairs Committee reportedly facilitated a meeting in Turkey that led to more than 20 Syrian rebel commanders signing "a historic agreement" to unite in the quixotic fight against both ISIS and Assad.)

Interestingly, the FP article noted that "[t]he two lawmakers don't exactly see eye-to-eye on the question of whether the United States should intervene more aggressively in the protracted civil war," with Engel having "carved out one of the most hawkish positions in Congress on Syria, being the first to introduce legislation authorizing lethal assistance for the rebels."

Moreover, as Rep. Engel pointed out in his opening remarks at the Syria briefing, he has "been personally focused on Syria for a long time." In 2003, he passed the Syria Accountability Act, which imposed sanctions on the government of Hafez Assad.

In a reference to his introduction of the Free Syria Act in March 2013, which authorized the President to provide lethal assistance to those Engel described as “carefully vetted members of the moderate Syrian opposition,” the reflexively pro-Israel Democratic congressman from New York said, “If we had taken that approach a year and a half ago, we may have been able to stem the growth of ISIS and weaken the regime of Bashar Assad. But we didn’t, unfortunately, so we’ll never really know what would have happened if we had acted then.”

While Caesar and his American-based Palestinian-Syrian interpreter clearly have the enthusiastic support of Israel’s friends in Washington, the photos presented as evidence of an alleged Syrian “holocaust” by Assad’s forces received their initial boost from one of Tel Aviv’s closest, albeit covert, Arab allies in their mutual war against the Syrian government.

As part of a review of the photos commissioned by the government of Qatar, David Crane, a former war-crimes prosecutor for Sierra Leone, reportedly spent hours interviewing Caesar. An Oct. 13 Yahoo News report by Michael Isikoff quotes Crane as saying that they document “an industrial killing machine not seen since the Holocaust.”

Like the director of the Holocaust Museum’s Center for the Prevention of Genocide, Crane has worked for the U.S. government, including in the field of military intelligence. His former posts include Director of the Office of Intelligence Review, assistant general counsel of the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Waldemar A. Solf Professor of International Law at the United States Army Judge Advocate Generals School.

Having ostensibly left the intelligence world behind him, Crane founded and directs the Syrian Accountability Project (SAP) at Syracuse University’s College of Law, which describes itself as “a cooperative effort between activists, non-governmental organizations, students, and other interested parties to document war crimes and crimes against humanity in the context of the Syrian Crisis.” According to its website, SAP has “worked closely with the Syrian National Coalition” which is listed as one of its clients.

Founded in Doha, Qatar in November 2012, the Syrian National Coalition represents the Free Syrian Army, which has reportedly collaborated with the al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamist Ahrar al-Sham in massacres of Syrian civilians such as the one that occurred this March in the village of Kassab, an ancestral home of Syria’s minority ethnic Armenians, on the Turkish border.

Professor Crane is also vice-president of I Am Syria, whose mission statement describes it as “a non-profit media based campaign that seeks to educate the

world of the Syrian Conflict.” I Am Syria’s president, Ammar Abdulhamid, has been a fellow at two of the most prominent Washington-based pro-Israel think tanks, the Saban Center for Middle East Policy and the neocon Foundation for the Defense of Democracies; while one of its education directors, Andrew Beitar, is a regional education coordinator for the Holocaust Museum.

As the case of the mysterious Caesar and his trove of photos clearly shows, those who want to launch a war of aggression on Syria as they have succeeded in doing in Iraq and Libya have at every opportunity sought, as Finkelstein put it, to drag in the Nazi holocaust.

As more and more people become wise to this ruse, they should keep in mind the two words espoused by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum: “Never Again.”

Maidhc Ó Cathail is a widely published writer and political analyst.
