

Obama's Stupid Propaganda Stuff

Exclusive: Just last month, President Obama dispatched Secretary of State Kerry to secure Russian President Putin's help in addressing the Syrian crisis and other world hotspots but despite Putin's agreement, Obama has reversed himself and is back hurling insults at the Russians, a troubling development, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

President Barack Obama must know better regarding the crisis in Ukraine, but he insists on reciting the propaganda lines drafted by his neoconservative and "liberal interventionist" advisers blaming everything on Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Perhaps, Obama just doesn't have the nerve to go against Official Washington's "conventional wisdom" no matter how misguided it is. The last time that Obama went against the grain in a decisive way was when he objected to the Iraq War in 2002, but then, of course, he was just a state senator in Illinois.

Watching his behavior in the White House over the past six-plus years, I've come to suspect that if he had been a national politician amid the Iraq War fever he would have gotten in line just like ambitious Sens. Hillary Clinton, John Kerry and Joe Biden did. Even as President, a position that gives him enormous power to push back against Official Washington's "group think," he won't.

Instead Obama spouts stupid propaganda stuff that is ultimately damaging to the American Republic. At a moment when Obama needs Putin's help in addressing dangerous crises in the Middle East particularly to deal with advances by Al-Qaeda's Nusra Front and Al-Qaeda's hyper-violent spinoff, the Islamic State Obama insists on joining in more misrepresentations about the Ukraine crisis.

At the end of the G-7 summit in Bavaria, Germany, Obama proudly announced that he had gotten the other six industrial powers to continue sanctions on Russia, based on the dubious argument that it is Russia, not the U.S.-backed regime in Ukraine, that requires more pressure to implement last February's Minsk-2 agreement.

The Minsk-2 deal largely reflected Putin's ideas regarding negotiations with ethnic Russian rebels in the east and constitutional changes granting the region substantial autonomy. However, after Minsk-2 was signed, hardliners in the Ukrainian government immediately sought to sabotage the political side by inserting a poison pill that required the rebels to essentially surrender before any negotiations could begin.

Since then, the Kiev regime has bulked itself up militarily, including training from 300 U.S. military advisers. In May, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko talked publicly about resuming the war and retaking rebel-held territory in the east, a position that even caused U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry to suggest that Poroshenko should “think twice” about such an action.

Kerry made that remark during meetings with Putin and senior Russian officials in Sochi, Russia, in what then appeared to be a realistic shift in Obama’s foreign policy, recognizing the grave dangers from a possible Al-Qaeda victory in Syria and the need for Russian help in averting that disaster. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[Obama’s Strategic Shift.](#)”]

However, in the last few weeks, the flip-flopping Obama seems to have flopped back into the hard-liners’ camp of neocon Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland and liberal-interventionist Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power. Not only did Obama press the G-7 allies to renew sanctions on Russia, Obama hurled personal insults at Putin.

Pointing Fingers

In [remarks](#) to the news media on Monday in Krun, Germany, Obama said, “there is strong consensus that we need to keep pushing Russia to abide by the terms of the Minsk agreement [and] that until that’s completed, sanctions remain in place. There was discussion about additional steps that we might need to take if Russia, working through separatists, doubled down on aggression inside of Ukraine.

“Ultimately, this is going to be an issue for Mr. Putin. He’s got to make a decision: Does he continue to wreck his country’s economy and continue Russia’s isolation in pursuit of a wrong-headed desire to re-create the glories of the Soviet empire? Or does he recognize that Russia’s greatness does not depend on violating the territorial integrity and sovereignty of other countries?

“And as I mentioned earlier, the costs that the Russian people are bearing are severe. That’s being felt. It may not always be understood why they’re suffering, because of state media inside of Russia and propaganda coming out of state media in Russia and to Russian speakers.

“And, ironically, one of the rationales that Mr. Putin provided for his incursions into Ukraine was to protect Russian speakers there. Well, Russian speakers inside of Ukraine are precisely the ones who are bearing the brunt of the fighting. Their economy has collapsed. Their lives are disordered. Many of them are displaced. Their homes may have been destroyed. They’re suffering. And the best way for them to stop suffering is if the Minsk agreement is fully

implemented.”

In other words, Obama was doing the Full Monty of Official Washington’s “group think” on the Ukraine crisis that it was all caused by Putin’s “aggression” and his delusions about reestablishing the Soviet or Russian Empire. But Obama knows the real history of the U.S.-supported coup d’etat that ousted Ukraine’s elected President Viktor Yanukovich on Feb. 22, 2014, despite Yanukovich’s political agreement a day earlier with France, Germany and Poland to accept reduced powers and early elections.

Rather than defending that political settlement, the United States and its European allies immediately recognized the coup regime as “legitimate,” although it included neo-Nazis and other violent right-wing extremists who were rabidly hostile to Ukraine’s ethnic Russian minority.

In the face of worsening violence, the people of Crimea where ethnic Russians are a substantial majority voted overwhelmingly to secede from Ukraine and rejoin Russia, an action supported by Russian troops who were based at Russia’s historic naval base at Sevastopol in Crimea. Russia accepted Crimea’s request but balked at a similar appeal from ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine.

Then, amid feverish anti-Russian propaganda in the U.S. and European news media, the Kiev authorities designated the ethnic Russian resistance in the east as “terrorists” and mounted a brutal “anti-terrorism operation” against the population with the regime’s neo-Nazi and other extremist militias spearheading the attacks. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Seeing No Neo-Nazi Militias in Ukraine.”](#)]

It was in the face of this ethnic cleansing that Russia moved to assist the defense of the so-called Donbass region. Yet, now Obama places the blame for all the destruction and suffering in eastern Ukraine, where thousands have died, not on the U.S.-backed Ukrainian government and its thuggish militias but on Putin.

And, with no sense of irony, Obama suggests that it is the Russian media that is distorting the story, another favorite theme of the U.S. propaganda campaign on Ukraine pushed by both the Obama administration and the mainstream U.S. media.

There was an up-is-down quality to the way that Obama presented the Ukraine situation which is troubling in one of two ways either he believes his own propaganda or he is a conscious liar. There’s also a third possibility, that he has completely lost his bearings and adopts one position one day and veers in the opposite direction the next depending on who last talked to him.

But whatever the case, Obama cannot expect Putin and the Russians to view his public comments and contradictory behavior in a favorable light and then agree

to cooperate with Obama on other hotspots where U.S. interests are much more endangered.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). 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](#).

The Demonization of Iran

Ever since Iran made it on to the neocon "regime change" list, its actions have been put through the special prism of demonization that is reserved for U.S. "enemies." Now, those exaggerations and distortions are obstructing an agreement to constrain Iran's nuclear program, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

As the nuclear negotiations with Iran enter what may be their final lap, diehard opponents of any agreement with Tehran have been leaning more heavily than ever on the theme that Iran is a nasty actor in the Middle East intent on doing all manner of nefarious things in the region.

Insofar as the theme is not just an effort to generate distaste for having any dealings with the Iranian regime and purports to have a connection with the nuclear agreement, the idea is that the sanctions relief that will be part of the agreement will give Iran more resources to do still more nefarious stuff in the region.

Several considerations invalidate this notion, just on the face of it, as a reason to oppose the nuclear agreement. The chief one is that if Iran really were intent on doing awful, destructive things in its neighborhood, that would be all the more reason to ensure it does not build a nuclear weapon, which is what the agreement being negotiated is all about.

Another consideration is that if the United States were to leave in place economic sanctions that supposedly were erected for reasons related to Iran's nuclear program, and to leave them in place to deny Iran resources to do other things, the United States would be telling not only Iran but also the rest of the world that the United States is a liar.

The United States would have lied when it said that it had imposed these sanctions for the purpose of inducing concessions regarding Iran's nuclear policy. The damage to U.S. credibility whenever the United States attempts in the future to use sanctions to induce policy change should be obvious.

Interestingly, calls to keep current sanctions in place to deny funding for Iranian regional activities are coming from some of the same quarters that call for putting even more of an economic squeeze on Iran to get a "better deal." This position is contradictory.

If the United States were to demonstrate that it is not going to remove existing sanctions in return for Iran's concessions on its nuclear program, the Iranians would have no reason to believe that still more concessions on their part would bring the removal of still more sanctions, and thus they would not make any more concessions.

An invalid assumption underlying the argument about freeing up resources is that the Iranians' regional policy is narrowly determined by how many rials they have in their bank account. This assumption contradicts, by the way, the assertion commonly made, again by some of the same quarters, that Iranian leaders are far from being green eyeshade types who do such careful calculations and instead are irrational religious fanatics who cannot be trusted with advanced technology let alone with a nuclear weapon.

In any case, with Iran just as with other states, foreign policy is a function of many calculations of what is or is not in their national interest, and not just a matter of the available financial resources.

A related unwarranted assumption is each additional rial that does become available to the Iranians they will spend on regional shenanigans that we won't like. That assumption is never supported by any analysis; it just gets tossed into discussion to be taken for granted.

If analysis is instead applied to the topic, a much different conclusion is reached; that Iran is far more likely to apply freed resources to domestic needs. This is a straightforward matter of political calculations and political survival, not only for President Hassan Rouhani but for other Iranian leaders who are acutely aware of the demands and expectations of the Iranian people in this regard.

But set aside for the moment all the logical inconsistencies and other reasons to reject the notion of an Iranian regional marauder as a reason to oppose the nuclear agreement. Focus instead on the image of an Iran whose current regional policy supposedly is already an assortment of destructive activities. This image

has become the kind of conventional wisdom that repeatedly gets invoked (even, in this instance, by supporters of the nuclear agreement) without any felt need by those who invoke it to provide any supporting facts or analysis because it is taken for granted that everyone “knows” it to be true.

The references to the image are almost always vague and general, couched in terms of Iran supposedly “destabilizing” the Middle East or seeking to “dominate” it or exercise “hegemony” over it, or that it is “on the march” to take over the region. Often there are references to “terrorism” and “subversion” without anything more specific being offered. Often the names of conflict-ridden countries in the region are recited, but again without any specifics as to who is doing what in those countries.

To get away from such uselessly general accusations, ask: (1) what *exactly* is Iran doing in the Middle East that is of concern; and (2) how does what Iran is doing differ from what other states are doing in the same places? A careful comparison of this sort leads to the conclusion that Iran, contrary to the conventional wisdom, does not stand out in doing aggressive, destabilizing or hegemonic things.

Iran is one of the largest states in the Middle East and naturally, as with any such state, competes for influence in its region. To try to keep any such state, be it Iran or any other, from competing for such influence would be futile and damaging in its own right.

To label Iranian policy as seeking “hegemony” or “domination” is only that, i.e., applying a label, when others are using more forceful and destructive ways of trying to extend their own influence in the same places. Iran, unlike others, has not launched wars or invaded neighboring territory (except in counterattacking during the war with Iraq that Saddam Hussein started). Nor has Iran drawn, China-like, any nine-dash lines and asserted unsupported domination over swaths of its own region.

The assumption that just about anything Iran does in the Middle East is contrary to U.S. interests keeps getting made despite what should be the glaringly obvious counterexample of the war in Iraq. Iran and the United States are on the same side there. They both are supporting the government of Iraq in trying to push back the radical group generally known as ISIS.

Why should Iran’s part of this effort be called part of regional trouble-making, while the U.S. part of it is given some more benign description? Those in the United States who would rather not face that counterexample are usually quick to mutter something like, “Yes, but the Iranians are doing this for their own malign purposes of spreading their influence in Iraq.”

The first thing to note in response to such muttering is that if we are worried about increased Iranian influence in Iraq, that increase is due chiefly not to anything the Iranians have done but rather to a war of choice that the United States initiated.

The next thing is to ask on behalf of what interests the Iranians would use their influence in Iraq, and how that relates to U.S. interests. The preeminent Iranian objective regarding Iraq is to avoid anything resembling the incredibly costly Iran-Iraq War, and to have a regime in Baghdad, preferably friendly to Iran, but at least not hostile to it, that would not launch such a conflict again.

Iran also does not want endless instability along its long western border, and its leaders are smart enough to realize that narrowly prejudicial sectarian politics are not a prescription for stability. These lines of thinking are consistent with U.S. interests; it is not only in the current fight against ISIS that U.S. and Iranian interests converge.

Look carefully also at another conflict-ridden Middle Eastern state whose name often gets casually invoked: Yemen. Iran and the United States are not on the same side of this civil war, although the United States probably has as much explaining to do as to why it has taken the side it has, the same side as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the most capable and threatening Al-Qaeda branch operating today, as Iran does.

Iran has become identified with the side of the rebellious Houthi movement, although the most prominent Yemeni leader on the same side as the Houthis is Ali Abdullah Saleh, who as the Yemeni president for more than 30 years was seen as *our* guy in Yemen, not the Iranians' guy.

Iran did not instigate the Houthi rebellion, nor are the Houthis accurately described as "clients" of Iran much less "proxies," as they often inaccurately are. Instead Iran was probably a source of restraint in advising the Houthis not to capture the capital of Sanaa, although the Houthis went ahead and did it anyway.

The Iranians probably are glad to see the Saudis bleed some in Yemen, and whatever aid Tehran has given to the Houthis was given with that in mind. But any such aid pales in comparison to the extent and destructiveness of the Saudis' intervention in Yemen, which has included aerial assaults that have caused many hundreds of civilian casualties.

In the same vein consider Bahrain, which is an interesting case given historical Iranian claims to Bahrain and past Iranian activity there. Despite that

background and despite Bahraini government accusations, there is an absence of reliable evidence of anything in recent years that could accurately be described as Iranian subversion in Bahrain.

Instead it is again the Saudis who have used forceful methods to exert their influence on a neighbor, and in this case to prop up an unpopular Sunni regime in a Shia majority country. The principal Saudi military intervention in Bahrain came a few years ago, but it was an early shot in a campaign that has taken fuller shape under King Salman to use any available means, including military force, to expand Saudi influence in the region.

If there is a Persian Gulf power that has been using damaging methods to try to become a regional hegemon, it is Saudi Arabia, not Iran.

The Saudis could claim to be acting on behalf of a status quo in Bahrain and Yemen, but then what about Syria, where it is Iran that is backing the existing regime? And as perhaps the most germane question, how can any one of the outside players that have mucked into that incredibly complicated civil war be singled out as a destabilizing regional marauder while the others (some of whom, such as the United States and Israel, have conducted their own airstrikes in the country) be given the benefit of more benign labeling?

Iran did not start the Syrian war. And each of the most significant sides fighting that war are dominated by what we normally would consider certifiable bad guys: the Assad regime, ISIS, and an Islamist coalition led by the local Al-Qaeda branch. It is hard to see a clear and convincing basis for parceling out benign and malign labeling here when it comes to the outside players.

Then of course there is the rest of the Levantine part of the region, including Palestine; the aid relationships that Iran has had with the H groups, Hezbollah and Hamas, are continually invoked in any litany of Iranian regional activity. Lebanese Hezbollah certainly is still an important ally of Iran, although it has long since become strong enough to outgrow any Iranian hand-holding.

We should never forget that prior to 9/11 Hezbollah was the group that had more U.S. blood on its hands through terrorism than any other group. We also should understand that Hezbollah has become a major player in Lebanese politics in a way in which many in the region, including its immediate political opponents, accept it as a legitimate political actor. Right now as a military actor it is deeply involved in the effort to support the Syrian regime, and it is not looking to stir up any new wars or instability anywhere else.

Hamas has never been anything remotely resembling a proxy of Iran, although it has accepted, somewhat reluctantly, Iranian aid in the absence of other help. To

Iran, Hamas represents Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation of (or blockading and subjugation of) Palestinian territory, without being an accessory to that occupation, which is how the Palestinian Authority is widely seen.

Hamas is the winner of the last free Palestinian election, and it has repeatedly made clear that its ambition is to hold political power among Palestinians and that it is willing to maintain a long-term truce with Israel. Right now Hamas is trying, unfortunately with only partial success, to keep small groups from overturning the current cease-fire with rocket firings into Israel.

Again, none of this is a conflict that Iran has instigated or that Iran is stirring up or escalating. Iran is not the cause of the instability that already reigns. And the broader opposition to continued Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory is opposition that Iran shares with many others, including the whole Arab world.

As long as we are looking at this part of the region, it is impossible to escape notice that Iran does not hold a candle to Israel when it comes to forcefully throwing weight around in the neighborhood in damaging and destabilizing ways, even without considering the occupation of the West Bank. This has included multiple armed invasions of neighboring territory as well as other actions, such as the attack on Iraq years ago that stimulated Iraq to speed up its program to develop nuclear weapons.

And before we leave the Middle East as a whole, it also is impossible to escape notice that the single most destabilizing action in the region over the past couple of decades was the U.S. launch of a war of aggression in Iraq in 2003. Iran certainly has done nothing like that.

The ritualistically repeated notion that Iran is wreaking instability all over the region is a badly mistaken myth. There are important respects in which Iranian policies and actions do offend U.S. interests, but protection of those interests is not helped by perpetuating myths.

Perpetuation of this particular myth has several deleterious effects. The most immediate and obvious one is to corrupt debate over the nuclear deal. Another is to foster broader misunderstanding about Iranian behavior and intentions that threatens to corrupt debate over other issues as well.

Yet another consequence involves a failure to understand fully that every state competes for influence. Such efforts to compete are called *foreign policy*. It would be in our own interests for other states to wage that competition through peaceful and legitimate means.

By misrepresenting who is doing what, and through what means, in the Middle East

today, the myth about Iranian behavior maintains a constituency for isolating and ostracizing Iran, which makes it less, not more, likely that Iran, so ostracized, will use peaceful and legitimate means to pursue its interests in the future.

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