

Who's to Blame for Syria Mess? Putin!

Exclusive: Official Washington's new "group think" is to blame Russia's President Putin for the Syrian crisis, although it was the neocons and President George W. Bush who started the current Mideast mess by invading Iraq, the Saudis who funded Al Qaeda, and the Israelis who plotted "regime change," says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Sen. Lindsey Graham may have been wrong about pretty much everything related to the Middle East, but at least he has the honesty to tell Americans that the current trajectory of the wars in Syria and Iraq will require a U.S. re-invasion of the region and an open-ended military occupation of Syria, draining American wealth, killing countless Syrians and Iraqis, and dooming thousands, if not tens of thousands, of U.S. troops.

Graham's grim prognostication of endless war may be a factor in his poll numbers below one percent, a sign that even tough-talking Republicans aren't eager to relive the disastrous Iraq War. Regarding the mess in Syria, there are, of course, other options, such as cooperation with Russia and Iran to resist the gains of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda and a negotiated power-sharing arrangement in Damascus. But those practical ideas are still being ruled out.

Official Washington's "group think" still holds that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad "must go," that U.S. diplomats should simply deliver a "regime change" ultimatum not engage in serious compromise, and that the U.S. government must obstruct assistance from Russia and Iran even if doing so risks collapsing Assad's secular regime and opening the door to an Al Qaeda/Islamic State victory.

Of course, if that victory happens, there will be lots of finger-pointing splitting the blame between President Barack Obama for not being "tough" enough and Russia's President Vladimir Putin who has become something of a blame-magnet for every geopolitical problem. On Friday, during [a talk](#) at Fort Meade in Maryland, Obama got out front on assigning fault to Putin.

Obama blamed Putin for not joining in imposing the U.S.-desired "regime change" on Syria. But Obama's "Assad must go!" prescription carries its own risks as should be obvious from the U.S. experiences in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Ukraine. Ousting some designated "bad guy" doesn't necessarily lead to some "good guy" taking over.

More often, "regime change" produces bloody chaos in the target country with

extremists filling the vacuum. The idea that these transitions can be handled with precision is an arrogant fiction that may be popular during conferences at Washington's think tanks, but the scheming doesn't work out so well on the ground.

And, in building the case against Assad, there's been an element of "strategic communications" the new catch phrase for the U.S. government's mix of psychological operations, propaganda and P.R. The point is to use and misuse information to manage the perceptions of the American people and the world's public to advance Washington's strategic goals.

So, although it's surely true that Syrian security forces struck back fiercely at times in the brutal civil war, some of that reporting has been exaggerated, such as the now-discredited claims that Assad's forces launched a sarin gas attack against Damascus suburbs on Aug. 21, 2013. The evidence now suggests that Islamic extremists carried out a "false flag" operation with the goal of tricking Obama into bombing the Syrian military, a deception that almost worked. [See Consortiumnews.com's "The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case."]

Even earlier, independent examinations of how the Syrian crisis developed in 2011 reveal that Sunni extremists were part of the opposition mix from the start, killing Syrian police and soldiers. That violence, in turn, provoked government retaliation that further divided Syria and exploited resentments of the Sunni majority, which has long felt marginalized in a country where Alawites, Shiites, Christians and secularists are better represented in the Assad regime. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Hidden Origins of Syria's Civil War."]

An Obvious Solution

The obvious solution would be a power-sharing arrangement that gives Sunnis more of a say but doesn't immediately require Assad, who is viewed as the protector of the minorities, to step down as a precondition. If Obama opted for that approach, many of Assad's Sunni political opponents on the U.S. payroll could be told to accept such an arrangement or lose their funding. Many if not all would fall in line. But that requires Obama abandoning his "Assad must go!" mantra.

So, while Official Washington continues to talk tough against Assad and Putin, the military situation in Syria continues to deteriorate with the Islamic State and Al Qaeda's affiliate, the Nusra Front, gaining ground, aided by financial and military support from U.S. regional "allies," including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Sunni-led Persian Gulf states. Israel also has provided help to the Nusra Front, caring for its wounded troops along the Golan Heights and bombing pro-government forces inside Syria.

President Obama may feel that his negotiations with Iran to constrain its nuclear program when Israeli leaders and American neocons favored a bomb-bomb-bombing campaign have put him in a political bind where he must placate Israel and Saudi Arabia, including support for Israeli-Saudi desired “regime change” in Syria and tolerance of the Saudi-led invasion of Yemen. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“On Syria, Incoherence Squared.”](#)]

Privately, I’m told, Obama agreed to – and may have even encouraged – Putin’s increased support for the Assad regime, realizing it’s the only real hope of averting a Sunni-extremist victory. But publicly Obama senses that he can’t endorse this rational move. Thus, Obama, who has become practiced at speaking out of multiple sides of his mouth, joined in bashing Russia sharing that stage with the usual suspects, including The New York Times’ editorial page.

In [a lead editorial](#) on Saturday, entitled “Russia’s Risky Military Moves in Syria,” the Times excoriated Russia and Putin for trying to save Assad’s government. Though Assad won a multi-party election in the portions of Syria where balloting was possible in 2014, the Times deems him a “ruthless dictator” and seems to relish the fact that his “hold on his country is weakening.”

The Times then reprises the “group think” blaming the Syrian crisis on Putin. “Russia has long been a major enabler of Mr. Assad, protecting him from criticism and sanctions at the United Nations Security Council and providing weapons for his army,” the Times asserts. “But the latest assistance may be expanding Russian involvement in the conflict to a new and more dangerous level.”

Citing the reported arrival of a Russian military advance team, the Times wrote: “The Americans say Russia’s intentions are unclear. But they are so concerned that Secretary of State John Kerry called the foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, twice this month and warned of a possible ‘confrontation’ with the United States, if the buildup led to Russian offensive operations in support of Mr. Assad’s forces that might hit American trainers or allies.

“The United States is carrying out airstrikes in Syria against the Islamic State, which is trying to establish a caliphate in Syria and Iraq, as well as struggling to train and arm moderate opposition groups that could secure territory taken from the extremists.”

Double Standards, Squared

In other words, in the bizarre world of elite American opinion, Russia is engaging in “dangerous” acts when it assists an internationally recognized government fighting a terrorist menace, but it is entirely okay for the United

States to engage in unilateral military actions inside Syrian territory without the government's approval.

Amid this umbrage over Russia helping the Syrian government, it also might be noted that the U.S. government routinely provides military assistance to regimes all over the world, including military advisers to the embattled U.S.-created regime in Iraq and sophisticated weapons to nations that carry out attacks beyond their own borders, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Clearly, the Times believes that what is good for the U.S. goose is not tolerable for the Russian gander. Indeed, if Russia's assistance to the Syrian government leads to a "confrontation" with U.S. forces or allies, it is Russia that is held to blame though its forces are there with the Syrian government's permission while the U.S. forces and allies aren't.

The Times also defends the bizarre effort by the U.S. State Department last week to organize an aerial blockade to prevent Russia from resupplying the Syrian army. The Times states:

"The United States has asked countries on the flight path between Russia and Syria to close their airspace to Russian flights, unless Moscow can prove they aren't being used to militarily resupply the Assad regime. Bulgaria has done so, but Greece, another NATO ally, and Iraq, which is depending on America to save it from the Islamic State, so far have not. World leaders should use the United Nations General Assembly meeting this month to make clear the dangers a Russian buildup would pose for efforts to end the fighting."

Given the tragic record of The New York Times and other mainstream U.S. media outlets promoting disastrous "regime change" schemes, including President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq in 2003 and President Obama's bombing campaign in Libya in 2011, you might think the editors would realize that the best-laid plans of America's armchair warriors quite often go awry.

And, in this case, the calculation that removing Assad and installing some Washington-think-tank-approved political operative will somehow solve Syria's problems might very well end up in the collapse of the largely secular government in Damascus and the bloody arrival of the Islamic State head-choppers and/or Al Qaeda's band of terrorism plotters.

With the black flag of Islamic terrorism flying over the ancient city of Damascus, Sen. Graham's grim prognostication of a U.S. military invasion of Syria followed by an open-ended U.S. occupation may prove prophetic, as the United States enters its final transformation from a citizens' republic into an authoritarian imperial state.

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](#).
