

PBS Joins the MSM's Syria-Russia Bias

Mainstream U.S. media systematically excludes points of view on world affairs that deviate from Official Washington's "group think." With no lessons learned from the Iraq-WMD debacle, the MSM only lets on establishment or right-wing pundits with conformist points of view on crises with Syria and Russia, notes Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

PBS Newshour is considered high-quality journalism by many North Americans. But is it? A test case is their report on Nov. 24 when a Russian jet was shot down and one pilot killed as he descended by parachute. This was a significant international event and the situation is still dangerous. The conflict in Syria could get even worse. PBS Newshour presented a discussion/analysis of the event with two guests: Nicholas Burns and Angela Stent. The PBS Newshour host was Judy Woodruff.

This critique applies to that one *PBS Newshour* broadcast but the essential points are true for much of what you see on the program (and across the mainstream U.S. news media). Assumptions and bias regarding the Syrian conflict are pervasive and persistent. So, how can U.S. foreign policy change (or even show some nuance) if the public is continually fed biased and false information from one point of view? Here are specific points:



–PBS *Newshour* selected two analysts with essentially the same viewpoint, representing the U.S. government and military/security establishment:

Nicholas Burns is a former U.S. Ambassador to NATO. In early 2003 he urged the "unity" of NATO as some NATO allies expressed doubts about the U.S. the invasion of Iraq. In 2006, he urged punishing sanctions on Iran. In 2011, Burn wrote, "President Obama was surely right to commit the United States, however reluctantly, to the NATO campaign [to overthrow Libyan President Gaddafi]." Burns has a track record supporting Western aggression against other countries. He evidently has learned nothing from the resulting chaos, devastation and

death.

Angela Stent is associated with conservative think tanks and a former State Department and National Intelligence Officer. She is also author of the 2015 book *"The Limits of Partnership: US-Russian Relations in the 21st Century."* Written in non-academic prose, the book explores what she considers four efforts by the U.S. to reset or start new relations with Russia following the Cold War.

Unfortunately the bias of the author is apparent and inconvenient history is not mentioned. For example, the Project for a New American Century and aggressive U.S. foreign policy under its influence have been "disappeared." She presents a biased history which ignores or whitewashes examples of U.S. collusion and support of violent coups – from Venezuela to Honduras to Ukraine and Libya.

–The analysts make false or exaggerated claims: Burns said the Russians "did violate Turkish air space" but he offers no evidence and it now appears the Russian jet was shot down over Syrian air space. Both Burns and Stent claim the Russians violated Turkish air space "several" times or "repeatedly." Woodruff refers to them as "invasions." Contrary to the allegations, the only confirmed Russian violation of Turkish air space was on Sept. 3 in bad weather at the beginning of Russia's anti-terrorist bombing campaign inside Syria.

–The analysts failed to include relevant information, such as: Air space violations occur frequently and Turkey is a major offender. The normal practice is to usher an intruding plane out of the air space, not shoot it down.

–The analysts are hypocritical about air space violations. Burns claims that Russia's alleged 17-second violation of Turkish air space "is clearly illegal under international law." Yet the analysts say nothing about the frequent, much longer and intentional violations of Syrian air space by American jets and bombers that have NOT been authorized by the Syrian government.

–The program fails to consider Putin's comments that the action was "a stab in the back, carried out by the accomplices of terrorists." Why wasn't this comment discussed? A Columbia University researcher lists proof of Turkish collaboration with ISIS here. Another lengthy list is here. American Lebanese journalist Serena Shim documented Turkey's pivotal role in this video. She was killed the day after publicly expressing fear of the Turkish Intelligence Agency (MIT). Why did the guests not mention any of this?

–The analysts also ignore Turkey's economic support of ISIS. For example, Bilal Erdogan, the son of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has been implicated in purchasing ISIS oil from Syria, mixing it with Iraqi Kurdish oil and shipping it abroad. Bilal Erdogan is co-owner of BMZ oil and chemicals shipping company

which has been buying additional ships. Burns talks about the importance of “history and context” but he leaves out essential facts and history about the conflict.

–The analysts distort facts to support their biases. Analyst Burns claims “The Russians have been bombing Syrian Turkmen, ethnic Turkmen villages.” Evidence indicates the Russians are not bombing random villages; they are bombing specific terrorist groups in the area. We know that terrorists are in the area because they have been raining missiles into Latakia city, killing 23 students and civilians on Nov. 10. We know the terrorists are there because they video recorded themselves. Other video shows the downing of the aircraft, the pilots descending, the “rebels” shooting at the parachutists, and then the captured dead Russian pilot. Article 42 of Geneva Convention says, “No person parachuting from a plane in distress shall be made the object of attack during his descent.” Why should Russia and Syria be criticized for attacking these terrorists? It has since emerged that the most vocal “rebel” leader in the video is a Turkish citizen.

–Burns conflates a sectarian extremist fringe with an entire religious branch. When he refers to “Sunni” groups he actually means the Wahabi/Takfiri opposition such as Jabhat al Nusra, Ahrar al Sham, ISIS, etc. Most Sunni Muslims in the world oppose the bastardization of their religious faith by the fanatic Wahabi element. Characterizing the jihadis as being “Sunni groups” is comparable to identifying the Ku Klux Klan as representing the “Christian group.” It’s additionally false and misleading because the majority of Syrian Army soldiers are Sunni.

–The analysts ignore the fact that Syria has been the victim of severe violations of international law for over four years. Turkey, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Qatar, France and the United Kingdom have been training armed opposition groups and supplying them with weapons, logistics and salaries with the goal of violently overthrowing the Syrian government. As confirmed by the International Court at The Hague in their ruling filed by Nicaragua against the United States, this is in breach of international law.

–The analysts convey the confusion and contradiction of Western policy toward Syria. Stent says, “We disagree with the Russians on the fate of Assad and we disagree on who the enemy is.” In short: Stent and Burns think the West should be able to dictate who can be President of Syria; they also think Russia should refrain from bombing any group except ISIS. They want Russia to refrain from bombing Nusra/Al Qaeda, Ahrar al Sham and other terrorist groups. It is a duplicitous strategy.

The Russian position is much more logical. They have been clear from the start:

They are there to oppose sectarian terrorists threatening the Syrian people and state. ISIS is one of these groups but there are many others. What is common among them is sectarianism and reliance on outside funding. One group consists of Uighurs of Chinese nationality. They are part of the "Army of Conquest" that made a big advance in northern Syria in spring 2015.

The idea that these sectarian terrorist groups should be allowed to roam free is illogical if your goal is to overcome terrorism. There are tens of thousands of sectarian fighters who are not in ISIS. Some of these groups threaten major population areas including Latakia and government-controlled sections of Aleppo. Other groups control border zones which allow for inflow of more weapons and jihadis. It is logical that the Russian Air Force and Syrian Army would prioritize attacks on these groups near major population centers and controlling border zones.

Regarding the "fate of Assad," the Russians believe the Syrian Presidency should be determined by Syrians not foreigners. They have indicated they would accept internationally supervised elections. That policy is in keeping with international law. The policy of the West trying to dictate who can or cannot be President of Syria is a violation of the United Nations Charter and International Law.

-Stent engages in amateur psychology instead of policy analysis. She speculates that Russia is intervening in the Syrian conflict because "they want the U.S. to come to them, they want to be the leader. ... There is some reckless behavior obviously." It's a silly analysis that ignores serious issues such as the U.S. policy of "regime change," the historic links between Syria and Russia, and the credible belief that the attack on Syria is a step toward attacking Iran.

-Analyst Burns concludes with call for war via "No Fly Zone." He says, "If the Russians don't restrain the Syrian government from firing barrel bombs into civilian neighborhoods the U.S. ought to consider a No Flight (sic) Zone with Turkey and other countries to shut down the Syrian Air Force. That's what Secretary [Hillary] Clinton has been advocating and I think she's right. ... The way to save civilians and reduce the number of refugees is to shut down air traffic in the northern part of Syria. That's an idea that the administration has to consider now given these events."

Thus Ambassador Burns goes from criticizing Russia for an alleged 17-second intrusion into Turkish air space to calling for Turkey, the United States and other countries to take over northern Syrian air space. It's a call for more war masquerading as a call for peace.

We can see where his call would lead by looking at consequences of the "No Fly

Zone” in Libya. This “humanitarian” effort became a cover for “regime change” that has resulted in vastly more conflict, deaths, displaced persons and refugees. Since the NATO-driven “regime change” in Libya, terrorism has exploded across Libya and into neighboring countries.

Does Burns really want to take the U.S. into a potential war with Syria and Russia by trying to take over northern Syria? What is wrong with following international law and letting the Syrian people determine their leader?

With Russian air support the Syrian Army is advancing on nearly all fronts. Is that what Turkey and other enemies of Syria are really concerned about?

The U.S. has been invading or surreptitiously overthrowing governments around the globe for the past 65 years. This U.S. aggression has usually ended badly, especially for the target country but also for the U.S. economy and population. Why do these wars keep happening? To some extent it is media failure to expose what’s going on and encourage serious debate.

The *PBS Newshour* program on Nov. 24 is an example of why the U.S. public is so confused about Syria. *PBS Newshour* could have presented one of the analysts, Burns or Stent, along with an analyst with a different viewpoint who could have challenged the biased perspective. For instance, it could have been someone from Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity like Ray McGovern or someone representing Russia or Syria, perhaps the Syrian Ambassador to the United Nations.

Instead we had another propaganda presentation, biased and misleading. *PBS Newshour* is failing the public. If you agree, consider letting the PBS ombudsman know. His email and phone contact is at www.pbs.org/ombudsman/home/

Rick Sterling is a writer and organizer with Syria Solidarity Movement, Task Force on the Americas and Mt Diablo Peace & Justice Center.
