

A Blind Eye Toward Turkey's Crimes

Exclusive: The alleged ties between Turkish President Erdogan and Islamist terrorists in Syria is an embarrassment for the Obama administration and the U.S. news media, which would prefer to look the other way rather than face up to the danger created by an out-of-control NATO "ally," writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Theoretically, it would be a great story for the American press: an autocrat so obsessed with overthrowing the leader of a neighboring country that he authorizes his intelligence services to collaborate with terrorists in staging a lethal sarin attack to be blamed on his enemy and thus trick major powers to launch punishing bombing raids against the enemy's military.

And, after that scheme failed to achieve the desired intervention, the autocrat continues to have his intelligence services aid terrorists inside the neighboring country by providing weapons and safe transit for truck convoys carrying the terrorists' oil to market. The story gets juicier because the autocrat's son allegedly shares in the oil profits.

To make the story even more compelling, an opposition leader braves the wrath of the autocrat by seeking to expose these intelligence schemes, including the cover-up of key evidence. The autocrat's government then seeks to prosecute the critic for "treason."

But the problem with this story, as far as the American government and press are concerned, is that the autocratic leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is in charge of Turkey, a NATO ally and his hated neighbor is the much demonized Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Major U.S. news outlets and political leaders also bought into the sarin deception and simply can't afford to admit that they once again misled the American people on a matter of war.

The Official Story of the sarin attack as presented by Secretary of State John Kerry, Human Rights Watch and other "respectable" sources firmly laid the blame for the Aug. 21, 2013 atrocity killing hundreds of civilians outside Damascus on Assad. That became a powerful "group think" across Official Washington.

Though a few independent media outlets, including Consortiumnews.com, challenged the rush to judgment and noted the lack of evidence regarding Assad's guilt, those doubts were brushed aside. (In an article on Aug. 30, 2013, I described the administration's "Government Assessment" blaming Assad as a "dodgy dossier," which offered not a single piece of verifiable proof.)

However, as with the “certainty” about Iraq’s WMD a decade earlier, Every Important Person shared the Assad-did-it “group think.” That meant – as far as Official Washington was concerned – that Assad had crossed President Barack Obama’s “red line” against using chemical weapons. A massive U.S. retaliatory bombing strike was considered just days away.

But Obama at the last minute veered away from launching those military attacks, with Official Washington concluding that Obama had shown “weakness” by not following through. What was virtually unreported was that U.S. intelligence analysts had doubts about Assad’s guilt and suspected a trap being laid by extremists.

Despite those internal questions, the U.S. government and the compliant mainstream media publicly continued to push the Assad-did-it propaganda line. In a formal address to the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 24, 2013, Obama 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.”

Later, a senior State Department official tried to steer me toward the Assad-is-guilty assessment of a British blogger then known as Moses Brown, a pseudonym for Eliot Higgins, who now runs an outfit called Bellingcat which follows an effective business model by reinforcing whatever the U.S. propaganda machine is churning out on a topic, except having greater credibility by posing as a “citizen blogger.” [For more on Higgins, see Consortiumnews.com’s “‘MH-17 Case: ‘Old Journalism’ vs. ‘New’.”]

The supposedly conclusive proof against Assad came in a “vector analysis” developed by Human Rights Watch and The New York Times tracing the flight paths of two rockets back to a Syrian military base northwest of Damascus. But that analysis collapsed when it became clear that only one of the rockets carried sarin and its range was less than one-third the distance between the army base and the point of impact. That meant the rocket carrying the sarin appeared to have originated in rebel territory.

But the “group think” was resistant to all empirical evidence. It was so powerful that even when the Turkish plot was uncovered by legendary investigative reporter Seymour M. Hersh, his usual publication, The New Yorker, refused to print it. Rebuffed in the United States the land of freedom of the press Hersh had to take the story to the London Review of Books to get it out in April 2014. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Was Turkey Behind Syria Sarin Attack?”]

The Easier Route

It remained easier for The New York Times, The Washington Post and other premier news outlets to simply ignore the compelling tale of possible Turkish complicity in a serious war crime. After all, what would the American people think if after the mainstream media had failed to protect the country against the lies that led to the disastrous Iraq War the same star news sources had done something similar on Syria by failing to ask tough questions?

It's also now obvious that if Obama had ordered a retaliatory bombing campaign against Assad in 2013, the likely winners would have been the Islamic State and Al Qaeda's Nusra Front, which would have had the path cleared for their conquest of Damascus, creating a humanitarian catastrophe even worse than the current one.

To confess to such incompetence or dishonesty clearly had a big down-side. So, the "smart" play was to simply let the old Assad-did-it narrative sit there as something that could still be cited obliquely from time to time under the phrase "Assad gassed his own people" and thus continue to justify the slogan: "Assad must go!"

But that imperative not to admit another major mistake means that the major U.S. news media also must ignore the courageous statements from Eren Erdem, a deputy of Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), who has publicly accused the Erdogan government of blocking an investigation into Turkey's role in procuring the sarin allegedly delivered to Al Qaeda-connected terrorists for use inside Syria.

In statements before parliament and to journalists, Erdem cited a derailed indictment that was begun by the General Prosecutor's Office in the southern Turkish city of Adana, with the criminal case number 2013/120.

Erdem said the prosecutor's office, using technical surveillance, discovered that an Al Qaeda jihadist named Hayyam Kasap acquired the sarin.

At the press conference, Erdem said, "Wiretapped phone conversations reveal the process of procuring the gas at specific addresses as well as the process of procuring the rockets that would fire the capsules containing the toxic gas. However, despite such solid evidence there has been no arrest in the case. Thirteen individuals were arrested during the first stage of the investigation but were later released, refuting government claims that it is fighting terrorism."

Erdem said the released operatives were allowed to cross the border into Syria and the criminal investigation was halted.

Another CHP deputy, Ali Ağker, added that the Turkish government misled the

public by claiming Russia provided the sarin and that “Assad killed his people with sarin and that requires a U.S. military intervention in Syria.”

Erdem’s disclosures, which he repeated in a recent interview with RT, the Russian network, prompted the Ankara Prosecutor’s Office to open an investigation into Erdem for treason. Erdem defended himself, saying the government’s actions regarding the sarin case besmirched Turkey’s international reputation. He added that he also has been receiving death threats.

“The paramilitary organization Ottoman Hearths is sharing my address [on Twitter] and plans a raid [on my house]. I am being targeted with death threats because I am patriotically opposed to something that tramples on my country’s prestige,” Erdem said.

ISIS Oil Smuggling

Meanwhile, President Erdogan faces growing allegations that he tolerated the Islamic State’s lucrative smuggling of oil from wells in Syria through border crossings in Turkey. Those oil convoys were bombed only last month when Russian President Vladimir Putin essentially shamed President Obama into taking action against this important source of Islamic State revenues.

Though Obama began his bombing campaign against Islamic State targets in Iraq and Syria in summer 2014, the illicit oil smuggling was spared interdiction for over a year as the U.S. government sought cooperation from Erdogan, who recently acknowledged that the Islamic State and other jihadist groups are using nearly 100 kilometers of Turkey’s border to bring in recruits and supplies.

Earlier this month, Obama said he has had “repeated conversations with President Erdogan about the need to close the border between Turkey and Syria,” adding that “there’s about 98 kilometers that are still used as a transit point for foreign fighters, ISIL [Islamic State] shipping out fuel for sale that helps finance their terrorist activities.”

Russian officials expressed shock that the Islamic State was allowed to continue operating an industrial-style delivery system involving hundreds of trucks carrying oil into Turkey. Moscow also accused Erdogan’s 34-year-old son, Bilal Erdogan, of profiting off the Islamic State’s oil trade, an allegation that he denied.

The Russians say Bilal Erdogan is one of three partners in the BMZ Group, a Turkish oil and shipping company that has purchased oil from the Islamic State. The Malta Independent reported that BMZ purchased two oil tanker ships from the Malta-based Oil Transportation & Shipping Services Co Ltd, which is owned by Azerbaijani billionaire Mubariz Mansimov.

Another three oil tankers purchased by BMZ were acquired from Palmali Shipping and Transportation Agency, which is also owned by Mansimov and which shares the same Istanbul address with Oil Transportation & Shipping Services, which is owned by Mansimov's Palmali Group, along with dozens of other companies set up in Malta.

The Russians further assert that Turkey's shoot-down of a Russian Su-24 bomber along the Syrian-Turkish border on Nov. 24 which led to the murder of the pilot, by Turkish-backed rebels, as he parachuted to the ground and to the death of a Russian marine on a rescue operation was motivated by Erdogan's fury over the destruction of his son's Islamic State oil operation.

Erdogan has denied that charge, claiming the shoot-down was simply a case of defending Turkish territory, although, according to the Turkish account, the Russian plane strayed over a slice of Turkish territory for only 17 seconds. The Russians dispute even that, calling the attack a premeditated ambush.

President Obama and the mainstream U.S. press sided with Turkey, displaying almost relish at the deaths of Russians in Syria and also showing no sympathy for the Russian victims of an earlier terrorist bombing of a tourist flight over Sinai in Egypt. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Obama Ignores Russian Terror Victims.](#)"]

New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman expressed the prevailing attitude of Official Washington by ridiculing anyone who had praised Putin's military intervention in Syria or who thought the Russian president was "crazy like a fox," Friedman wrote: "Some of us thought he was just crazy.

"Well, two months later, let's do the math: So far, Putin's Syrian adventure has resulted in a Russian civilian airliner carrying 224 people being blown up, apparently by pro-ISIS militants in Sinai. Turkey shot down a Russian bomber after it strayed into Turkish territory. And then Syrian rebels killed one of the pilots as he parachuted to earth and one of the Russian marines sent to rescue him."

Taking Sides

The smug contempt that the mainstream U.S. media routinely shows toward anything involving Russia or Putin may help explain the cavalier disinterest in NATO member Turkey's reckless behavior. Though Turkey's willful shoot-down of a Russian plane that was not threatening Turkey could have precipitated a nuclear showdown between Russia and NATO, criticism of Erdogan was muted at most.

Similarly, neither the Obama administration nor the mainstream media wants to address the overwhelming evidence that Turkey along with other U.S. "allies"

such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been aiding and abetting Sunni jihadist groups, including Al Qaeda and Islamic State, for years. Instead, Official Washington plays along with the fiction that Saudi Arabia, Turkey and others are getting serious about combating terrorism.

The contrary reality is occasionally blurted out by a U.S. official or revealed when a U.S. intelligence report gets leaked or declassified. For instance, in 2009, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted in a confidential diplomatic memo, disclosed by Wikileaks, that “donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide.”

According to a Defense Intelligence Agency report from August 2012, “AQI [Al Qaeda in Iraq, which later morphed into the Islamic State] supported the Syrian opposition from the beginning, both ideologically and through the media. AQI declared its opposition of Assad’s government because it considered it a sectarian regime targeting Sunnis.”

The DIA report added, “The salafist, the Muslim Brotherhood, and AQI are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria. The West, Gulf countries, and Turkey support the opposition.”

The DIA analysts already understood the risks that AQI presented both to Syria and Iraq. The report included a stark warning about the expansion of AQI, which was changing into the Islamic State. The brutal armed movement was seeing its ranks swelled by the arrival of global jihadists rallying to the black banner of Sunni militancy, intolerant of both Westerners and “heretics” from Shiite and other non-Sunni branches of Islam.

The goal was to establish a “Salafist principality in eastern Syria” where Islamic State’s caliphate is now located, and that this is “exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition” i.e. the West, Gulf states, and Turkey “want in order to isolate the Syrian regime,” the DIA report said.

In October 2014, Vice President Joe Biden told students at Harvard’s Kennedy School that “the Saudis, the emirates, etc. were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war [that] they poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad except the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and Al Qaeda.”

Despite these occasional bursts of honesty, the U.S. government and the mainstream media have put their goal of having another “regime change” this time in Syria and their contempt for Putin ahead of any meaningful cooperation toward defeating the Islamic State and Al Qaeda.

This ordering of priorities further means there is no practical reason to revisit who was responsible for the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin gas attack. If Assad's government was innocent and Ergogan's government shared in the guilt, that would present a problem for NATO, which would have to decide if Turkey had crossed a "red line" and deserved being expelled from the military alliance.

But perhaps even more so, an admission that the U.S. government and the U.S. news media had rushed to another incorrect judgment in the Middle East and that another war policy was driven by propaganda rather than facts could destroy what trust the American people have left in those institutions. On a personal level, it might mean that the pundits and the politicians who were wrong about Iraq's WMD would have to acknowledge that they had learned nothing from that disaster.

It might even renew calls for some of them the likes of The New York Times' Friedman and The Washington Post's editorial page editor Fred Hiatt to finally be held accountable for consistently misinforming and misleading the American people.

So, at least for now – from a perspective of self-interest – it makes more sense for the Obama administration and major news outlets to ignore the developing story of a NATO ally's ties to terrorism, including an alleged connection to a grave war crime, the sarin attack outside Damascus.

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](#)).
