

Hillary's Link to Honduran Violence

Little mentioned in the Democratic campaign is Hillary Clinton's role in supporting a 2009 coup in Honduras that contributed to a human rights crisis, including the recent murder of a renowned environmental activist, writes Marjorie Cohn.

By Marjorie Cohn

A critical difference between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton is their position on whether children who fled violence in Central American countries, particularly Honduras, two years ago should be allowed to stay in the United States or be returned.

Sen. Sanders states unequivocally that they should be able to remain in the U.S. Former Secretary of State Clinton disagrees. She would guarantee them "due process," but nothing more. In 2014, Clinton told CNN's Christiane Amanpour, "It may be safer [for the children to remain in the U.S.]," but "they should be sent back."

By supporting the June 28, 2009 coup d'état in Honduras when she was secretary of state, Clinton helped create the dire conditions that caused many of these children to flee. And the assassination of legendary Honduran human rights leader Berta Cáceres earlier this month can be traced indirectly to Clinton's policies.

During the Feb. 11 Democratic debate in Milwaukee, Clinton said that sending the children back would "send a message." In answer to a question by debate moderator Judy Woodruff of PBS, she said, "Those children needed to be processed appropriately, but we also had to send a message to families and communities in Central America not to send their children on this dangerous journey in the hands of smugglers."

Sanders retorted, "Who are you sending a message to? These are children who are leaving countries and neighborhoods where their lives are at stake. That was the fact. I don't think we use them to send a message. I think we welcome them into this country and do the best we can to help them get their lives together."

In the March 9 debate in Miami between the two Democratic candidates, Sanders accurately told moderator Jorge Ramos of Univision, "Honduras and that region of the world may be the most violent region in our hemisphere. Gang lords, vicious people torturing people, doing horrible things to families."

He added, "Children fled that part of the world to try, try, try, try, maybe, to

meet up with their family members in this country, taking a route that was horrific, trying to start a new life.”

The violence in Honduras can be traced to a history of U.S. economic and political meddling, including Clinton’s support of the coup, according to American University professor Adrienne Pine, author of *Working Hard, Drinking Hard: On Violence and Survival in Honduras*.

Pine, who has worked for many years in Honduras, told Dennis Bernstein of KPFA radio in 2014 that the military forces that carried out the coup were trained at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (formerly called the U.S. Army School of the Americas) in Fort Benning, Georgia. Although the coup was supported by the United States, it was opposed by the United Nations and the Organization of American States (OAS). The U.N. and the OAS labeled President Manuel Zelaya’s ouster a military coup.

“Hillary Clinton was probably the most important actor in supporting the coup [against the democratically elected Zelaya] in Honduras,” Pine noted. It took the United States two months to even admit that Honduras had suffered a coup, and it never did admit it was a military coup. That is, most likely, because the Foreign Assistance Act prohibits the U.S. from aiding a country “whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup or decree.”

Although the U.S. government eventually cut nonhumanitarian aid to Honduras, the State Department under Clinton took pains to clarify that this was not an admission that a military coup had occurred.

“Hillary Clinton played a huge role in propping up the coup administration,” Pine said. “The State Department ensured the coup administration would remain in place through negotiations that they imposed, against the OAS’ wish, and through continuing to provide aid and continuing to recognize the coup administration.”

“And so if it weren’t for Hillary Clinton,” Pine added, “basically there wouldn’t be this refugee crisis from Honduras at the level that it is today. And Hondurans would be living a very different reality from the tragic one they are living right now.”

In her book *Hard Choices*, Clinton admitted she helped ensure that Zelaya would not be returned to the presidency. She wrote, “In the subsequent days [following the coup] I spoke with my counterparts around the hemisphere, including Secretary [Patricia] Espinosa in Mexico. We strategized on a plan to restore order in Honduras and ensure that free and fair elections could be held quickly and legitimately, which would render the question of Zelaya moot.”

When he was deposed, Zelaya was attempting to get a nonbinding resolution on the

ballot asking voters whether they wished to reform the constitution. He supported a 60 percent hike in the minimum wage, “and this infuriated two U.S. companies, Chiquita Brands International (formerly United Fruit) and Dole Food Company,” said John Perkins, author of *The New Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*, in an interview with the website Truthout. The big corporations feared that a rise in Honduras’ minimum wage could spread to other countries in Latin America.

Zelaya put in place several liberal policies, including free education and meals for children, subsidies to small farmers, lower interest rates and free electricity.

“These policies paid off,” Perkins said. “Honduras enjoyed a nearly 10 percent decline in the poverty level. But these same policies were seen as a dire threat to the hegemony and bottom lines of global corporations and as a precedent that would alter policies throughout Latin America and much of the rest of the world. Corporate leaders demanded that the CIA take out this democratically elected president. It did.”

Less than a month after the coup, Hugo Llorens, former U.S. ambassador to Honduras, sent a cable to Clinton and other top U.S. officials. The subject line read: “Open and Shut: The Case of the Honduran Coup.” The cable said, “There is no doubt” that the coup was “illegal and unconstitutional.” Nevertheless, as noted above, Clinton’s objective was to “render the question of Zelaya moot.”

After the coup, there was a fraudulent election financed by the National Endowment for Democracy – notorious for meddling in Latin America – and the State Department. The election ushered in a repressive, militarized regime. Conditions deteriorated, leading to the exodus of thousands of Honduran children.

Since the coup, the Honduran government has carried out systematic repression against most sectors of society, including teachers, farmers, union leaders, gays, peasant organizers, journalists and anyone who opposed the coup. Many were assassinated. Honduras’ homicide rate was already the highest in the world at the time of coup, and it soared between then and 2011. There is rampant corruption and drug-related gang violence.

Amid all this, the United States has added two military bases in Honduras – bringing the total to 14 – and increased its financing of the Honduran police and military.

Before the coup, Cáceres, a prize-winning activist, worked with indigenous groups on human rights and education issues with Zelaya’s support. In a 2014

interview, she cited Clinton's role in the coup, saying, "The same Hillary Clinton, in her book 'Hard Choices,' practically said what was going to happen in Honduras. This demonstrates the bad legacy of North American influence in our country."

Cáceres added, "The return of Mel Zelaya to the presidency (that is, to his constitutionally elected position) was turned into a secondary concern. There were going to be elections. ... We warned that this would be very dangerous. ... The elections took place under intense militarism, and enormous fraud."

Cáceres criticized the coup government for passing terrorist and intelligence laws that criminalized protest, labeling the actions "counterinsurgency" conducted in the interests of "international capital."

Cáceres was killed March 3 by armed men who broke into her home. Her friend and compatriot, journalist Gustavo Castro Soto, wounded in the assault, is being held incommunicado by the government.

On Thursday, more than 200 human rights, faith-based, indigenous rights, environmental, labor and nongovernmental groups sent an open letter to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, expressing "shock and deep sorrow regarding the murder of Honduran human rights and environmental defender Berta Cáceres ... winner of the prestigious 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize."

The groups urged Kerry to support an independent international investigation into her murder led by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. They also urged the State Department "to suspend all assistance and training to Honduran security forces, with the exception of investigatory and forensic assistance to the police, so long as the murders of Berta Cáceres and scores of other Honduran activists remain in impunity."

Marjorie Cohn is a professor at Thomas Jefferson School of Law, former president of the National Lawyers Guild, and deputy secretary general of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers. Her most recent book is *Drones and Targeted Killing: Legal, Moral, and Geopolitical Issues*. Visit her website at <http://marjoriecohn.com/> and follow her on Twitter at @marjoriecohn. [This article originally appeared at http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/hillary_clintons_link_to_a_nasty_piece_of_work_in_honduras_20160315]

Putin Shuns Syrian 'Quagmire'

Exclusive: Gambling that President Obama will cooperate in seeking peace for Syria, Russian President Putin called back much of Russia's military force dispatched to Syria last fall, writes ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Russian President Vladimir Putin's abrupt announcement that Russia would begin "the withdrawal of the main part" of its military "contingent" from Syria has been widely seen not only as a welcome surprise, but also as a hopeful fillip to serious negotiations to end the carnage in what is left of that beleaguered country.

As always, a modicum of skepticism is warranted the "morning after," but the pledge to pull out the bulk of the Russian force seems genuine and, at this writing, the withdrawal is already under way. Putin's announcement appears to mark the beginning of the end of Russia's key but limited military intervention – the game-changer that started on Sept. 30, 2015, with Russian air strikes that enabled the Syrian army to regain lost ground, sever jihadist supply lines to Turkey, and drive rebels from hundreds of towns and cities.

Putin was clear in noting the Russian military presence that will remain in Syria, but was not so clear on its future use: "Our naval base in Tartus and airbase at Khmeimim will operate 'as usual'. They are to be safely protected from land, sea, and air."

This formulation presumably would allow for continued airstrikes on designated terrorist groups like the Islamic State and Al Qaeda's Nusra Front, including during the current "cessation of hostilities" negotiated by the U.S. and Russia. (Putin's phrasing may also be viewed as a warning against Turkey and/or Saudi Arabia not to act on recent threats to invade Syria.)

That said, many knowledgeable observers have expressed surprise that the partial cease-fire that went into effect on Feb. 27 has largely held. Plus, the rate of airstrikes reportedly has plunged since then.

A New Future

With all due respect to Yogi Berra's dictum – "It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future" – Putin's withdrawal order constitutes Part II of the game-changer put in play five and a half innings ago last September. Thus, it is now doubly the case that "The future ain't what it used to be." In essence, the ball is now bouncing around in President Barack Obama's infield.

A great deal will depend on whether he will risk incurring the wrath of “allies”-cum-wealthy-arms-customers like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel, as well as unpredictable Turkey – an actual NATO ally (sans-quotation-marks), by applying unstinting pressure to get them to stop supporting terrorists in Syria.

On Monday, Putin said he considered the tasks given to the Russian defense ministry last September, “as a whole,” fulfilled. He had defined those tasks on Oct. 11, 2015, on Russian TV: “Our objective is to stabilize the legitimate authority [in Syria] and create conditions for a political compromise.”

Russia’s armed intervention did strengthen the position of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, but – not surprisingly – political compromise toward peace remains elusive. Still, the altered circumstances have advanced the peace process, in part, because Moscow’s intervention last fall was met with a clear-headed response from President Barack Obama, who chose to see a glass-half-full in Russia’s intervention.

It was no secret that one key Russian aim was to rescue Assad from a possible defeat at the hands of the jihadist “Army of Conquest” freshly armed by Saudi Arabia and Turkey, including with U.S.-made TOW missiles. But even benighted White House advisers seemed able to discern that the devil-they-knew (Assad) might be preferable to the cutthroats of Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL) or Al Qaeda’s affiliate, Nusra Front.

To his credit, Obama bet on the possibility that Russian airstrikes would also help thwart further ISIS gains and perhaps even help lead to serious negotiations. Thus, Obama instructed Secretary of State John Kerry to (1) forgo the poison-pill “Assad-must-go” precondition to talks on Syria’s future; (2) set a place for Iran at the table; and (3) collaborate closely with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, to “deconflict” airstrikes over Syria and redouble efforts to get serious negotiations under way.

With uncommon speed, a meeting attended by representatives of 19 regional and global powers (including Iran) was held in Vienna on Oct. 30, 2015, one month after the Russian airstrikes began; on Dec. 18, the UN Security Council unanimously approved a road map and timeline for talks on Syria; and on Feb. 1, 2016, indirect talks between Syrian government and opposition leaders took place in Geneva, mediated by UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura.

Those Geneva talks made zero progress; they were quickly suspended and resumption was put off for several weeks. They got under way again on Monday, which was not only the day Putin chose to announce the Russian withdrawal, but also the day that unarmed street protests broke out five years ago in Syria and were cruelly crushed by Assad’s security apparatus.

Will Talks Make Progress?

Just as Moscow's military intervention put Assad back on his feet, the Russian pullout is likely now to make him wobblier, and Moscow may hope the withdrawal will put additional pressure on him to be more willing to compromise. One positive sign has come from those Syrian opposition leaders who have already voiced cautious praise for the Russian withdrawal.

The telephone conversation between President Obama and President Putin on Monday evening suggests that they remain willing to build on the cessation of hostilities and lean on their respective clients to negotiate in good faith, even though the obstacles remain formidable.

For example, Foreign Minister Lavrov had this to say on Monday about the resumption of the talks in Geneva: "The work is not easy; it is yet to be understood how all these groups [taking part in the intra-Syrian talks] could gather at the same table together ... but the process has gotten under way, and it is in our common interests to make it sustainable and irreversible."

And according to the Russian news agency TASS, President Assad has told President Putin by telephone that he is ready to start a political process in Syria as soon as possible and that he hoped that eventual full-scale UN-mediated talks between Syrian government and opposition representatives in Geneva would produce concrete results.

A Calculated Decision

Putin is gambling that the interested parties – first and foremost, the U.S. – will put the heat on those over whom they have influence to make the cessation of hostilities stick and cooperate in thwarting the aims and actions of ISIS and Al Qaeda.

Russia's decision on a troop pullout having been unilateral, Putin retains the option to reinsert Russian forces should the gamble fail. It seems clear that he would prefer not to have to do that. And he is unlikely to do that, short of a rapidly growing threat from terrorists, trained and equipped for violence in Syria, returning to stir up trouble in Russia.

Putin is acutely aware of quagmires. The Soviet Union got bogged down in one in Afghanistan and, of course, he has watched what he calls "partners" get stuck there as well – not to mention Iraq, or Syria, or Libya – much less Vietnam. Last October, when President Obama and Secretary Kerry chose to warn Putin about quagmires, I can imagine the look on the Russian President's face.

The Russian withdrawal bespeaks an understanding that risky gambles are less to

be feared than quagmires – the more so since Moscow lacks one of its “partner’s” seemingly inexhaustible source of funding for its military escapades that result in quagmires. Indeed, Moscow has already announced a five percent cutback in military spending for this year.

Typically, when responding to provocations (like the February 2014 coup in Ukraine) from “partners,” as well as to other dangers to Russia’s security interests, Putin has displayed a notable penchant for heeding dicta more contemporary than those of Yogi Berra. One of them seems to be President Obama’s favorite motto: “Don’t do stupid stuff.”

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. During his 27-year career at CIA he was chief of the Soviet Foreign Policy Branch and prepared the *President’s Daily Brief* for Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Reagan. He is co-founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

Risks in Putin’s Syria Withdrawal

Exclusive: After helping Syria’s army push back jihadist rebels, Russian President Putin says he will begin withdrawing Russian forces, raising new questions about Syria’s future, writes Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s surprise announcement to withdraw most Russian war planes and personnel from Syria has left the public in the dark about his motives, raising troubling questions about whether the move will provide an opening for the U.S., Turkey and their Gulf allies to resume their drive towards “regime change” in Damascus.

More than five months of Russian airstrikes and Russia’s reconstitution of the Syrian Army dramatically turned the war in President Bashar al-Assad’s favor and has left the jihadists in disarray. But the liberation of Aleppo was not yet complete. Also, the Islamic State has not been destroyed, although the Syrian army reportedly had entered Palmyra and reached near Raqqa, Islamic State’s capital.

Faced with the loss of territory and Russia’s destruction of much of its oil infrastructure and supply lines to Turkey, Islamic State was forced to cut its

fighters' salaries, spurring increasing numbers of defections, including by a man from Alexandria, Virginia on Monday.

It is curious then that Russia, having the extremists on the ropes, would withdraw before the mission was accomplished – a mission to destroy terrorism in Syria announced by President Putin at the UN General Assembly in September.

Under the terms of the cessation of hostilities, in place for nearly two weeks, Russia could continue to strike Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and the Islamic State as well as provide air cover to the Syrian Arab Army on the ground against these terrorist forces.

Putin's move has led to widespread speculation that perhaps he has made a deal with the U.S., a grand bargain of sorts. Maybe Washington has offered a major concession on Ukraine, something President Barack Obama may gladly concede given what a disaster the U.S. adventure in that country has become.

Perhaps in a game of chicken with Obama, Putin blinked first. The U.S. has wanted Russia out of the Syrian theater since the moment it entered. Now, with Russia yielding the Syrian skies will the U.S. set up "a no-fly zone" as Turkey and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have desperately wanted?

Will Saudi and Turkish forces invade Syria to secure a partitioned state in eastern Syria – the so-called Plan B – through which they can run a natural gas pipeline from Qatar to Turkey on land now held by the Saudi-Turkish Islamic State proxies? Such a pipeline providing natural gas to Europe would directly undercut Russia, which now provides the majority of gas to the continent.

Some analysts believe the entire Syrian war was instigated when Assad in 2009 rejected a Qatari-Turkish-Saudi proposed gas line through Syrian territory. Two years later those three countries took advantage of a popular uprising to send in foreign jihadists to get rid of Assad. It turned out to be a lot more difficult than they imagined, with the war now five years old and Assad still in power.

With the gains made by the Russian-backed Syrian military in the past five months, a desperate Saudi Arabia and Turkey were poised to invade Syria to at least set up such an eastern Syrian state, if not try to drive towards Damascus to overthrow Assad. But Ankara and Riyadh said they wouldn't invade without U.S. ground forces leading the way. However, such an intervention would have risked a direct U.S. confrontation with nuclear armed Russia, with all that implies.

With Russia still in the skies over Syria, President Obama apparently rejected the Saudi-Turkish invasion plea. But now that the Russian deterrent will be gone, Turkish and Saudi appetites might be whetted (although Obama has indicated

a loss of patience with these purveyors of extremism).

Following the Russian withdrawal, even if Obama still continues to defy his neoconservative (and liberal interventionist) advisers who want to overthrow Assad even at the cost of a U.S.-led invasion, what about the next occupant of the White House?

At a Republican debate last week, three of the four candidates said they would support between 20,000 to 30,000 U.S. troops in Syria and Iraq, supposedly to fight the Islamic State. Once on the ground, however, the troops could easily make a detour towards Damascus.

Curiously, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in the last days offered to divide the task of defeating Islamic State by inviting the U.S. to take Raqqa, an offer the U.S. refused. It is not at all clear why Russia would want the U.S. to control the Islamic State capital unless Moscow is pushing for a federalized Syria, which it has publicly supported. Assad has apparently also agreed.

Not quite a partition, a federal Syria could consist of an eastern province centered on Raqqa and Deir al-Zor, now under Islamic State control; a Kurdish province in the north; and an Alawite-Christian rump Syria, from Damascus to Aleppo.

But will the U.S. and its Gulf allies agree to this compromise or seize the opening to invade and remove Assad once and for all? Another question is whether Turkey would accept a federal Kurdish state on its borders?

A federation would retain power for the central government, something the Turks and Gulf Arabs would not easily accept. If they can't have Assad's head they might go for an independent Sunni state in the east – a different creature than a federal state.

An invasion to grab such a state would bring bloodshed and possibly Russia back into the conflict. A federation instead can be set up through negotiation – and indeed the U.S. and Russia may have already agreed on this. It would be up to the U.S. to bring the Gulf and its insurgents along.

These will be the hottest topics at U.N. peace talks that have resumed in Geneva. Will the talks yield a peace deal in which Assad stays at least six more months until a transitional government takes over, writes a new constitution and 18 months from now holds a general election over a Federal Syria?

The Saudi-led opposition still wants Assad removed immediately, something Russia, the U.S. and the United Nations reject. If some of the less extreme rebels can be brought around to accept a peaceful settlement, the talks might go

somewhere.

Putin says the Russian intervention was a success because it stabilized the government and made a diplomatic solution possible. That remains to be determined.

Joe Lauria is a veteran foreign-affairs journalist based at the U.N. since 1990. He has written for the Boston Globe, the London Daily Telegraph, the Johannesburg Star, the Montreal Gazette, the Wall Street Journal and other newspapers. He can be reached at joelauria@gmail.com and followed on Twitter at [@unjoe](#).
