

Introducing Our Newest Feature: Video Interviews

Dear Readers,

In an effort to expand our outreach and provide a deeper context for our articles, we are pleased to introduce the newest feature of Consortiumnews.com: video interviews with our “exclusive” article contributors.

Our most recent video interviews include discussions with Robert Parry on his articles: [The Clinton/Trump AIPAC ‘Pander-Off’](#), [Obama’s Foreign-Policy Self-Enslavement](#), [Kerry Balks at Supplying MH-17 Data](#) and [Bernie Sanders as Commander-in-Chief](#).



Articles will be collected on our new page, “Video Interviews.” Please check back for more interviews as exclusive articles are published. We encourage you to share the videos with friends and family and on social media.

How US-Backed War on Syria Helped ISIS

Exclusive: By funneling TOW missiles and other weapons to Syrian jihadists for their “regime change” war, President Obama facilitated the Islamic State’s rise with the terrorist blowback now hitting Europe, says Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

Why are Islamic militants wreaking havoc from Brussels to Lahore? The best way to answer this question is by taking a close look at how *The New York Times* covered this weekend’s liberation of Palmyra from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s Islamic State.

The article, entitled [“Syrian Troops Said to Recapture Historic Palmyra From ISIS,”](#) began on a snide note. While the victory may have netted Bashar al-Assad “a strategic prize,” reporters Hwaida Saad and Kareem Fahim wrote that it also provided the Syrian president with “something more rare: a measure of international praise.”

The article noted that “Mr. Assad’s contention that his government is a bulwark against the transnational extremist group” has been bolstered, but added that “his foes and some allies argue that he must leave power as part of a political settlement to end the war in Syria” – without, of course, specifying who those allies might be.

Then it offered a bit of background: “Lost in the celebrations was a discussion of how Palmyra had fallen in the first place. When the Islamic State captured the city in May [2015], the militants faced little resistance from Syrian troops. At the time, residents said officers and militiamen had fled into orchards outside the city, leaving conscripted soldiers and residents to face the militants alone.”

Since the *Times* claims to have “several hundred” surreptitious contacts inside Syria, the charge that Assad’s troops fled without a fight may conceivably be correct. But it’s hard to square with reports that the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL and Daesh) had to battle for seven or eight days before entering the city and then had to deal with a counter-offensive on the city’s outskirts. But even if true, it’s only part of the story and a small one at that.

The real story began two months earlier when Syrian rebels launched a major offensive in Syria’s northern Idlib province with heavy backing from Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Led by Al Nusra, the local Al Qaeda affiliate, but with the full participation of U.S.-backed rebel forces, the assault proved highly successful because of the large numbers of U.S.-made optically guided TOW missiles supplied by the Saudis. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Climbing into Bed with Al-Qaeda.”]

The missiles gave the rebels the edge they needed to destroy dozens of government tanks and other vehicles according to videos posted on social media websites. Indeed, one pro-U.S. commander told *The Wall Street Journal* that the TOWs completely “flipped the balance of power,” enabling the rebels to dislodge the Syrian army’s heavily dug-in forces and drive them out of town. Although the government soon counter-attacked, Al Nusra and its allies continued to advance to the point where they posed a direct threat to the Damascus regime’s stronghold in Latakia province 50 or 60 miles to the west.

Official Washington was jubilant. “The trend lines for Assad are bad and getting worse,” a senior official crowed a month after the offensive began. The *Times* happily observed that “[t]he Syrian Army has suffered a string of defeats from re-energized insurgents ... [which] raise newly urgent questions about the durability of President Bashar al-Assad’s rule.”

Assad was on the ropes, or so everyone said. Indeed, ISIS thought so as

well, according to the Associated Press, which is why it decided that the opportunity was ripe to launch an offensive of its own 200 miles or so to the southeast. Worn-out and depleted after four years of civil war, the Syrian Arab Army retreated before the onslaught.

But considering the billions of dollars that the U.S. and Saudis were pouring into the rebel forces, blaming Damascus for not putting up a stiffer fight is a little like beating up a 12-year-old girl and then blaming her for not having a better right hook.

So the U.S. and its allies helped Islamic State by tying down Assad's forces in the north so that it could punch through in the center. But that's not all the U.S. did. It also helped by suspending bombing as the Islamic State neared Palmyra.

As the *Times* put it at the time: "Any airstrikes against Islamic State militants in and around Palmyra would probably benefit the forces of President Bashar al-Assad. So far, United States-led airstrikes in Syria have largely focused on areas far outside government control, to avoid the perception of aiding a leader whose ouster President Obama has called for."

The upshot was a clear message to ISIS to the effect that it had nothing to worry about from U.S. jet bombers as long as it engaged Assad's troops in close combat. The U.S. thus incentivized ISIS to press forward with the assault. Although residents later wondered why the U.S. had not bombed ISIS forces "while they were traversing miles of open desert roads," the answer, simply, is that Washington had other things on its mind. Rather than defeating ISIS, it preferred to use it to accomplish its primary goal, which was driving out Assad.

The Blowback

But what does this have to do with Brussels and Lahore? Simply that America's fundamental ambivalence toward ISIS, Al Qaeda, and similar groups – its policy of battling them on one hand and seeking to make use of them on the other – is what allows Sunni terrorism to fester and grow.

The administration is shocked, SHOCKED, when Islamists kill innocent people in Belgium but not when they kill innocent people in Syria. This is why the White House long regarded ISIS as a lesser threat: because it thought its violence would remain safely contained.

"Where Al Qaeda's principal ambition is to launch attacks against the West and

U.S. homeland,” Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes explained in August 2014, “ISIL’s primary focus is consolidating territory in the Middle East region to establish their own Islamic State.”

Since the only people in harm’s way were Syrians, there was no cause for alarm. The rest of the world could relax.

Hence the confusion when ISIS did the unexpected by striking out at Western targets after all. As the *Times* observed in a major takeout this week on Islamic State’s Western operations, officials were slow to connect the dots because Euro-terrorism was not supposed to be ISIS’s thing: “Even as the group began aggressively recruiting foreigners, especially Europeans, policymakers in the United States and Europe continued to see it as a lower-profile branch of Al Qaeda that was mostly interested in gaining and governing territory.”

Turkish officials made essentially the same point last week in response to widespread complaints that they have done little to prevent Sunni terrorists from making their way to Syria. Not so, they countered. When they tried to return the jihadis from whence they came, they found that members of the European Union were none too eager to have them.

“We were suspicious that the reason they want these people to come is because they don’t want them in their own countries,” a senior Turkish security official told the London *Guardian*. Instead, they preferred to see them continue on their way. And why not? At home, they would only cause trouble, whereas in Syria they would advance Western interests by waging war against Assad’s Baathist government.

Thus, Brussels was unresponsive when Turkish officials informed it that they had detained a Belgian citizen named Ibrahim el-Bakraoui in the border town of Gaziantep on suspicion of traveling to Syria to join the jihad. The Turks deported him anyway, but the Belgians remained unconcerned until El-Bakraoui turned up among the suicide bombers at Zaventem airport.

The same thing happened when the Turks intercepted a Syria-bound French national named Omar Ismail Mostefai. Paris was also unresponsive until Mostefai wound up among the ISIS militants who stormed the Bataclan concert hall last November, at which point its attitude turned distinctly less blasé.

In June 2014, Turkish security officers in Istanbul intercepted a Norwegian citizen traveling to Syria with a camouflage outfit, a first-aid kit, knives, a gun magazine and parts of an AK-47, all of which E.U. customs officials had somehow overlooked.

Two months later, they intercepted a German citizen with a suitcase containing a

bulletproof vest, military camouflage and binoculars that customs had also failed to notice. When they apprehended a Danish-Turkish dual citizen on his way to Syria, they sent him back to Copenhagen. But the Danes gave him another passport regardless so he could continue on his way. Everyone figured that what happens in Syria stays in Syria, so why worry?

Now, of course, everyone is worried big time. With the AP reporting that Islamic State has armed and trained 400 to 600 fighters for its European operations, talk of ISIS sleeper cells is ubiquitous. Referring to the Brussels district where the March 22 bombing plot was hatched, Patrick Kanner, the French social-democratic minister of youth, warned ominously: “There are today, as is well known, hundreds of neighborhoods in France that present potential similarities to what happened in Molenbeek.”

The implication was that the state of emergency should not only continue but deepen. As hundreds of neo-Nazis descended on Brussels chanting anti-immigrant slogans, paranoia took a giant leap forward as did its handmaidens racism and Islamophobia.

But as much everyone would like to blame it all on Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen and others of that ilk, none of this is really their fault. To the contrary, the West’s disastrous Syria policy is entirely the creation of nice-guy liberals like Barack Obama. Desperate to appease both Israel and the Sunni oil sheiks, all of whom for various reasons wanted Assad to go, he signed on to a massive Sunni jihad that has turned Syria into a charnel house.

With death estimates now running as high as 470,000, which is to say one person in nine, the idea that massive violence like this could remain confined to a single country was absurd to begin with. Yet Obama went along regardless.

Indeed, the administration is still unwilling to back down despite all that has happened since. When a reporter asked point-blank at a State Department press briefing, “Do you want to see the [Damascus] regime retake Palmyra or would you prefer that it stays in Daesh’s hands,” spokesman Mark Toner hemmed and hawed before finally admitting that a takeover was preferable because “we think Daesh is probably the greater evil in this case.” (Exchange starts at 1:05.)

But the next day he walked back even that mealy-mouthed statement. Refusing to endorse Palmyra’s fall at all, he declared: “I’m not going to laud it because it’s important to remember that one of the reasons Daesh is in Syria is because Assad’s brutal crackdown on his own people created the kind of vacuum, if you will, that has allowed a group like ISIL or Daesh to flourish. Just because he’s now, given the cessation of hostilities, willing and-or able to divert his forces to take on Daesh doesn’t exonerate him or his regime from the gross

abuses that they've carried out against the Syrian people."

Since Assad is the only one to blame, the U.S. doesn't have to ponder its own contribution to the problem. Instead, it gives itself a clean bill of health and moves on. Rather, it would like to move on if only ISIS would let it.

But the more aid the U.S. and its allies funnel into the hands of Sunni terrorists, the more groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda will grow and the farther their reach will extend. The upshot will be more bombings and shootings in Paris, Brussels, and who knows where else. Racism and Islamophobia will continue to surge regardless of what *bien-pensant* liberals do to talk it down.

The liberal center is engineering its own demise.

Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace).

Derailing Peace Deal in Colombia

Exclusive: A resurgence of drug-connected right-wing terrorism in Colombia has undercut a historic peace deal between the government and the main leftist rebel group, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Cuban and U.S. leaders overcame immense obstacles to end more than a half century of confrontation between their countries with President Barack Obama's visit to Havana. But they were unable to end more than a half century of political violence in Colombia by brokering a peace pact that was scheduled to be signed in Havana on March 23, one day after Obama departed.

That target date was set by Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos and leaders of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, during negotiations hosted by Cuban President Raúl Castro last September. Now the parties are aiming for a new deadline at the end of this year.

After 52 years of conflict, they are used to setbacks and delays. But the armed struggle has already killed more than 220,000 and claimed 7.9 million registered victims – including 77,000 who disappeared – so Colombia desperately needs peace and reconciliation as soon as possible.

The key sticking point concerns parties who are *not* at the negotiating table. They include a smaller but still potent rebel group, the National Liberation

Army, or ELN. More important are right-wing and criminal paramilitary groups who have the motive and means to massacre FARC soldiers and their civilian sympathizers if they get the opportunity.

Until Bogota – and Washington – find a convincing way to restrain these paramilitary terrorists after FARC lays down its arms, Colombia will never find peace.

The peace process has made great strides over the past year. Overall violence is down. The government pardoned some FARC prisoners and helped them return to civilian life. FARC promised to end child recruitment and release children under the age of 15 from its ranks; it also conducted an historic ceremony of public apology for its part in killing civilians during a 2002 firefight with paramilitary forces. The two sides engaged in clearing mines for the first time this spring. They have jointly asked the United Nations Security Council to monitor an eventual ceasefire.

But the Colombian government demands that FARC guerrillas demobilize and hand over their weapons in remote rural “concentration zones.” They would be spared arrest as long as they remain in isolation. FARC insists that it be permitted to store weapons in the zones and be granted their freedom anywhere in the country.

Explaining the organization’s reluctance to totally disarm, a FARC negotiator pointedly questioned whether the government could guarantee their security in the face of paramilitary threats.

“In the last month, more than 28 community organizers, human rights defenders and peasant farmers have been murdered and their killers continue to enjoy impunity,” he said. “Solving the paramilitary problem the main challenge we are facing today, to help this process move ahead.”

Opposing the Peace Process

The U.N. Human Rights Council for Colombia reported in March that “diverse local interests and groups opposed to change resulting from the peace process” – including armed political and criminal groups engaged in land seizures, drug trafficking, illegal mining and extortion – “are already employing violence and intimidation to protect their interests, and the State has not had a sufficiently effective response.”

It added, with a strong affirmation of FARC’s concerns, that “demobilizing guerrillas . . . could also be vulnerable.”

Referring to right-wing death squads that annihilated supporters of a prominent leftist political party affiliated with FARC, the report declared, “The hundreds

of assassinations of Unión Patriótica political party leaders and members in the 1980s and 1990s illustrate the elevated risk for new political movements. Security guarantees and transformation of the political reality are essential to avoid repetition of this situation.”

Many experts estimate that more than 2,000 Unión Patriótica members were murdered by right-wing death squads serving powerful drug lords and allied government security forces. The victims included two of the party’s presidential candidates, one elected senator, eight congressmen, 70 councilmen, and dozens of deputies and mayors. The assassination campaign ended a ceasefire reached by FARC and the government in 1987 and destroyed hopes for peace.

Much of this terrorist violence was perpetrated by the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), a paramilitary organization that eventually took over the cocaine trade from its original patron, the Medellín Cartel. The AUC enjoyed support from government and military officials who appreciated its help in the war against FARC (which also had dirty hands in the drug trade).

The AUC’s 30,000 members officially demobilized in 2006. Subsequent testimony by some of them helped convict 60 former congressmen and seven former governors for collaborating with the criminal organization. Former President Alvaro Uribe accepted money from the AUC for his 2002 presidential campaign; his brother Santiago was arrested in February on charges of helping to create a paramilitary group of his own.

The Colombian human rights group MOVICE reported in March that a new generation of criminal bands have launched a campaign of murder and intimidation to disrupt the current peace talks. Their victims include community leaders and peasants who claim their lands were illegally seized.

“I think part of the message [of the killings] is to intimidate the FARC, and let them know what awaits them if they enter politics,” said a MOVICE spokesman.

Rightist Drug Lords

Chief among the threats to FARC and its community supporters is Colombia’s most powerful drug trafficking organization, “Los Urabeños,” which has muscled its way into many former guerrilla territories and today controls much of the country’s Caribbean coast. It is a direct successor to the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia.

“We feel obligated to continue our anti-subversive fight,” a spokesman for Los Urabeños declared soon after the group announced its formation.

The Santos government has made genuine moves to seek justice against the

instigators of political violence. It recently arrested a senior general on charges of overseeing the grisly killing of thousands of civilians whom the Army falsely claimed were guerrillas in order to inflate body counts and win bonuses.

State prosecutors also said they will arrest a former head of the army – and ally of former President Uribe – for the same crime, known as the “false positives” scandal.

According to Human Rights Watch, at least 16 active and retired army generals are currently under investigation by the Attorney General’s office for “false positive” killings, and about 800 lower-ranking soldiers have been convicted. But human rights groups warn that rules tentatively worked out by the government and FARC to promote reconciliation by granting immunity for war crimes could prevent further prosecution of false positive cases.

The United States, which bears a heavy responsibility for promoting state violence and the growth of paramilitary organizations to combat communism in Colombia in the 1950s and 1960s, can make partial amends by supporting President Santos’s efforts at reconciliation while pressing to see that justice is served by holding war criminals accountable.

In the interests of peace and justice, Washington should also offer all reasonable aid to help Colombia suppress organizations like Los Urabeños that continue the terrible legacy of previous terrorist and criminal paramilitary groups.

As Adam Isacson, a Colombia security analyst at the Washington Office on Latin America, noted recent murders by the new generation of paramilitary forces “make it a lot harder for the FARC leadership to convince their rank and file to demobilize. The U.S. has to make it clear that the paramilitaries...are right up there with the Zetas, Sinaloa [cartels] and the MS-13 as security threats, because of their ability to threaten a peaceful outcome in Colombia.”

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international affairs, including *The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War and the International Drug Traffic* (Stanford University Press, 2012). Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews were “Risky Blowback from Russian Sanctions”; “Neocons Want Regime Change in Iran”; “Saudi Cash Wins France’s Favor”; “The Saudis’ Hurt Feelings”; “Saudi Arabia’s Nuclear Bluster”; “The US Hand in the Syrian Mess”; and “Hidden Origins of Syria’s Civil War.”]

U.S. Troops on Russia's Borders

Official Washington's hype about "Russian aggression" has cloaked a U.S. military buildup on Russia's borders, possibly increasing risks of escalation and even world war, explains ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

U.S. military deployments to Eastern Europe are being ramped up. The latest word as reported by the *Wall Street Journal* is that regular rotation of brigade-size forces, with the most modern equipment, will bring a de facto continuous U.S. military presence to the areas in question, which include the Baltic republics, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria.

It is easy to see that the immediate motivation behind this measure, as Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work indicated to the *Journal*, is to calm nervousness among some of those states about what the Russian bear is up to. But there are other implications of any deployment of this nature; if there weren't, then there would be no reason to expect the deployment to have the desired calming effect.

We are entitled to be told, to a greater extent than we have been told so far, just what the strategy is behind this deployment. What exactly is the threat that we are trying to meet, in more specific terms than just "Russian aggression"? What sort of scenario do we have in mind? What would be the U.S. response to such a scenario, and what role would the newly deployed U.S. troops be playing?

There has been plenty of precedent and practice in thinking about such matters. Throughout the Cold War the conundrum of how to protect Western Europe from the feared scenario of being overrun by a huge Soviet conventional assault was never solved to a high degree of satisfaction, although the stationing of U.S. troops in Europe had a lot to do with trying to solve it. Even when the United States had a couple of hundred thousand troops in West Germany, that still probably would not have been enough to stop a determined assault by the Red Army at its Cold War peak.

Nuclear weapons often figured into the strategic thinking of the time, although again without a high degree of satisfaction. At the level of long-range nuclear weapons there was always the question of whether the United States would be willing to risk New York and Washington to save Frankfurt and Hamburg. At the theater level, saving Western Europe from Soviet occupation would have been at best a pyrrhic victory if it meant turning much of the saved territory into a nuclear wasteland.

In the end the reliance was largely placed on the concept of the trip-wire and on the trip-wire's hoped-for deterrent effect. U.S. troops were the wire; their forward presence in Europe assured that Americans would be killed, and that the United States would be directly involved, in the earliest hours of any European war. And the added costs and risks of escalation from U.S. involvement would, went the thinking, help deter the Soviets from starting such a war.

Perhaps the concept of the trip-wire is once more at work with these latest announced deployments. But again, it would be good to know more about the envisioned circumstances that would trip the wire. The Russians are not in a position to do anything as big as the feared pouring of Red Army hordes from East Germany through the Fulda gap into West Germany.

While being capable of less, one can imagine Russia trying something less. What about a seizure of the Baltic Republics? For several reasons, that is less likely to happen than what happened with Crimea. But even with that U.S. brigade around, Russia probably could accomplish such a seizure fairly quickly. This raises, in a different version of the old Cold War question about what the United States would be willing to risk to save Frankfurt or Hamburg, the question of what it would be willing to risk to save Vilnius or Riga.

The mere fact of NATO membership of the Baltic Republics and the application of the commitment to them under Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty already raises this issue. Having troops on the ground makes this question more acute.

Of course, we in the public cannot be expected to have every contingent U.S. response spelled out in detail and with certainty. Deterrence often depends on sowing some doubt in an adversary's mind. But our own unease ought to get at least as much priority as the unease of governments in Eastern Europe.

Understanding and justifying the strategy are all the more important in that there are costs to this deployment beyond the material costs of personnel and equipment. Some of those costs involve relations with Russia.

The Russians have a strong case in complaining that such a deployment violates understandings reached with them as the Cold War was ending and that were directly linked to Moscow's acquiescence in peaceful reunification of a Germany that everyone realized would have a Western orientation. The understandings were further codified a few years later in a joint statement by NATO and Russia.

The U.S. administration seems to be dancing around the issue of permanent deployments in Eastern Europe by using what technically are temporary rotations of troops, similar to the game it is playing with the U.S. public regarding how many U.S. troops are in Iraq. De facto renegeing on previous understandings ought

to worry anyone concerned about U.S. credibility. And we should remember how much difference Russian cooperation, or lack of it, can make in dealing with problems such as the war in Syria.

We also need to think, beyond simple reassurance, about possible reactions of the East European governments. For them to be a little nervous about what Russia might do is not necessarily a bad thing. It would not be in our interests or the interests of European stability, for example, for the Latvian government to be too relaxed about Russian reactions when it makes decisions about the treatment of its ethnic Russian minority – a matter with the potential to trigger a crisis-instigating response by Moscow.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)
