

# Duping Progressives into Wars

The online advocacy group, Avaaz, has pulled progressives into support of U.S. “humanitarian” wars in Libya and Syria by promoting sweet-sounding ideas like “no-fly zones,” as John Hanrahan explains.

By John Hanrahan

A recent two-part series in *The New York Times* laid out in detail the pivotal role that then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton played in President Obama’s decision to join in France and Britain’s 2011 military campaign against long-time Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. *The Times* articles make the case that Clinton bears a heavy part of the responsibility for the tragic, increasingly chaotic aftermath of that campaign in which Gaddafi was ousted and killed.

As *The Times* summaries of the articles put it, Gaddafi’s fall “seemed to vindicate Hillary Clinton. Then militias refused to disarm, neighbors fanned a civil war, and the Islamic State found refuge,” leaving Libya “a failed state and a terrorist haven.”

While neocons, right-wingers and humanitarian interventionists back in 2011 were seeking regime change in Libya, there was one non-governmental organization that was alone among progressive groups in mobilizing public opinion around the world in support of military action in Libya in the form of “a no-fly zone.”

And this wasn’t just any organization, but the fast-growing, on-line advocacy giant Avaaz.org, which in 2011 had seven million members and today boasts 43.1-million members in 194 countries. As such, the New York City-based Avaaz is, as we noted in a previous article, the largest and most influential Internet-based, international advocacy organization on the planet.

Through its members’ petitions and a full-page ad last June in *The New York Times*, Avaaz has for the last few years been pushing for “a no-fly zone” in Syria, as have assorted neocons and war-hawks in Congress and think-tanks who favor military operations to remove Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from power. Hillary Clinton (but not other presidential candidates Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump) is a staunch advocate for “a no-fly zone” and regime change in Syria.

Like Clinton and other interventionists, Avaaz – in advocating for “a no-fly zone” in Syria – has not been chastened by what its advocacy wrought in Libya. Some of the same arguments for “a no-fly zone” that Avaaz made for Libya, it has made again over the last few years for Syria. This, despite as we noted in that earlier article, that top U.S. generals have warned that “a no-fly zone” in Syria is a “high-risk operation, a violent combat action that results in lots of

casualties," civilian and military.

It's instructive to examine Avaaz's no-fly zone advocacy for Libya in 2011 to get a handle on the organization's continued thinking that – barring a diplomatic settlement growing out of a current tentative ceasefire in Syria – more war, under the cover of humanitarian intervention, would somehow save more civilians' lives.

### **Libyan 'No-Fly Zone' Didn't Turn Out Well**

In its call for "a no-fly zone" in Libya in 2011, Avaaz submitted to the United Nations a petition containing 1,202,940 signatures gathered on-line.

Demonstrating Avaaz's impact, 90 percent of those were collected in just a two-day period between March 15 and 17 of that year, when its reported membership was a more modest, but still impressive, seven million.

And we now know what a sage piece of advocacy that was – as Libya experienced not only "a no-fly zone," but U.S./NATO forces' bombardments, the ousting and killing of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, the rise of ISIS, the attack on the U.S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi, the flood of refugees from the chaotic, failed country that Libya is today.

Even at the time Avaaz was gathering all those signatures back in 2011 in support of "a no-fly zone" in Libya, there were critics who wondered why a U.S.-based non-governmental organization felt it had to stand up with neocons and war-hawks in advocating for an action that violated Libya's sovereignty and was likely to lead to more violence against the Libyan people.

As John Hilary writing in *The Guardian* presciently warned in March 2011: "Little do most of these generally well-meaning activists know, they are strengthening the hands of those western governments desperate to reassert their interests in north Africa. ... A no-fly zone would almost certainly draw NATO countries into further military involvement in Libya, replacing the agency of the Libyan people with the control of those governments who have shown scant regard for their welfare."

Hilary, executive director of War on Want, the U.K.-based charity that fights poverty and economic injustice, further noted, again presciently: "Clearly a no-fly zone makes foreign intervention sound rather humanitarian – putting the emphasis on stopping bombing, even though it could well lead to an escalation of violence."

Noting that support for "a no-fly zone" in Libya was at that time "rapidly becoming a key call of hawks on both sides of the Atlantic," (just as has been the case in more recent years regarding Syria) Hilary commented: "The military

hierarchy, with their budgets threatened by government cuts, surely cannot believe their luck – those who usually oppose wars” [such as Avaaz] “are openly campaigning for more military involvement.”

On-line progressive organizations constantly seek signatures on petitions calling on the U.S. or other governments to adopt or change or reject certain policies. But Hilary pointed out that calling for “a no-fly zone” crosses a line into dangerous territory. As he wrote:

“The issue exposes the core of the problem with internet activism: instead of changing the world through a lifetime of education, it aims to change the world through a single click of the mouse. The impacts might be benign, when lobbying a government to stop causing harm. But a positive plan of action in a situation such as Libya requires more thought. Calling for military intervention is a huge step – the life and death of hundreds of thousands of people might hang in the balance. The difference between the ease of the action and impact of the consequence is great.”

### **Avaaz’s Justification**

It’s worth examining the Libya experience to get some idea of how Avaaz sees using military action to achieve what it contended would be civilian-saving humanitarian results.

Looking back, in calling for “a no-fly zone,” Avaaz appeared to fully accept and spread the Gaddafi-will-systematically-murder-all-opponents line that Western governments were trumpeting as the justification for intervention, stating in its March 15, 2011 message to members: “Right now Gaddafi’s forces are crushing the rebellion town by town” and noted that “brutal retribution awaits Libyans who challenged the regime. If we don’t persuade the U.N. to act now, we could witness a bloodbath.”

Avaaz went on to say that while it “is deeply committed to non-violence ... enforcing a no-fly zone to ground Gaddafi’s gunships is one case where UN-backed military actions seems necessary.”

On March 17, 2011, just two days into flooding the U.N. Security Council with petitions containing 1,172,000 signatures, Avaaz enthusiastically reported (exclamation point and all) that the United Nations had agreed to take “‘all necessary measures’ short of an invasion to protect the people of Libya under threat of attack, including a no-fly zone!”

It seems Avaaz’s expressed deep commitment to nonviolence had expanded beyond “a no-fly zone” to encompass “all necessary measures” – and Libya was soon on the receiving end of all those necessary measures.

When it was promoting “a no-fly zone” for Libya, Avaaz – as with its current Syria campaign – did receive pushback from some members. The organization felt it necessary to respond at some length on-line to the criticism before “the no-fly zone” was put into effect and the onslaught against Libya began.

Avaaz’s then-campaign director Ben Wikler (who is now with MoveOn.org), in an on-line posting responding to John Hilary’s *Guardian* article quoted above, outlined a number of reasons and procedures Avaaz used in taking up the cause of “a no-fly zone” for Libya. Among his points:

–“The call for a no-fly zone originated from Libyans – including the provisional opposition government, Libya’s (defected) ambassador to the UN, protesters, and youth organizations. ... Avaaz staff are in close and constant contact with activists inside Libya and have been repeatedly asked to move forward on this campaign.”

–“In some ways,” Wikler wrote, “we work a lot like journalists ... talking to people and weighing the facts before we form conclusions. However, our staff’s personal conclusions also have to pass the test of our membership being strongly supportive of any position we take.”

In the Libya case, though, it would seem that Avaaz scarcely considered the potential negative aspects of military action – such as, when you “win,” what happens afterwards.

–According to Wikler, a random-sample poll taken before the petition was promulgated on-line, showed that “84% of [Avaaz] members supported this campaign, while 9% opposed it. Since launching it, we’ve found intense support for the campaign from around the world.” Avaaz says that petition ideas such as “a no-fly zone” campaign “are polled and tested weekly to 10,000-member random samples – and only initiatives that find a strong response are taken” to the wider membership.

The organization has not disclosed who within Avaaz was the main instigator of the petitions for “no-fly zones” in Libya and Syria. Generally speaking, Avaaz says here’s how its petitions develop: “Avaaz staff don’t set an agenda and try to convince members to go along with it. It’s closer to the opposite: staff listen to members and suggest actions they can take in order to affect the broader world. Small wonder, then, that many of our most successful campaigns are suggested first by Avaaz members themselves. And leadership is a critical part of member service: it takes vision and skill to find and communicate a way to build a better world.”

Although this doesn’t say so, certainly on a matter of such import and

controversy as “a no-fly zone” the final call would logically come from executive director Ricken Patel.

–Avaaz staff played “a key role in consulting with leading experts around the world (and most of our staff have policy as well as advocacy backgrounds) on each of the campaigns we run, and Libya was no exception.” This begs the question: Who were these experts, and did Avaaz seek out critics of such an action?

–On the question of whether imposing “a no-fly zone” would lead to a full-blown international war in Libya, Wikler downplayed the possibility at the time: “No-fly zones can mean a range of different things. Some analysts and military figures [none named by Wikler] have argued that it would require a pre-emptive attack on Libya’s anti-aircraft weapons. Others [again, none named], however, contend that merely flying fighter planes over the rebel-controlled areas would ensure that Qaddafi wouldn’t use his jets to attack eastern Libya, because he knows his air force is weaker than that of Egypt or NATO states. The best solution is the one that reduces civilian deaths the most with the least violence. *Things might not turn out as expected, but while there are potential dangers to an international war, there are certain dangers to civilians if things continue without a no-fly zone.*” [Emphasis added.]

Calling for military action seems a very risky calculation for an advocacy group to make, given even its own nodding recognition that the action it supports might bring on an international war or other “things ... not expected.” And to discuss such an issue in a mere one sentence and conclude that the risk is worth it – and after the petition is already out there – is not indicative of a transparent, all-cards-on-the-table process that make for well-informed potential petition signers.

At the very least, now with the benefit of hindsight, you would think that the Libya experience would give Avaaz some second thoughts about supporting “a no-fly zone” in what top U.S. generals quoted in our previous article have described as the even riskier environment of Syria. But no such soul-searching is evident in Avaaz’s campaign for a Syrian “no-fly zone.”

For this and the previous article, we submitted a series of questions to Avaaz media personnel and campaign directors, with an emphasis on obtaining specifics as to the organization’s rationale for supporting “no-fly zones” in Libya and Syria – including whether the tragic outcome in Libya had figured at all in Avaaz’s consideration of whether to call for “a no-fly zone” in Syria. After requests (and reminders) on five occasions in November, December and January, we finally received a response on Feb. 11 from campaign director Nell Greenberg, but that addressed only a few of our specific questions. Our follow-up

questions, submitted on Feb. 12, have gone unanswered.

As with the other questions we submitted to Avaaz personnel, the organization did not answer whether the Libya experience made the organization's leaders think twice about taking up the Syria "no-fly zone" issue. It was possibly obscurely referencing the Libya "no-fly zone" when Greenberg stated to us: "Much of what you're asking for are reflections on past campaigns given the geopolitical landscape today. But based on the way we work, I cannot tell you how any Avaaz member would feel today about a past campaign without going back and asking them."

Our follow-up question made it clear that we were not asking how any individual Avaaz member might feel about the Libya campaign today, but rather how Avaaz's leaders felt about proposing "a no-fly zone" for Syria when the Libya military action had turned out so disastrously. To date, Avaaz has not responded to any of our follow-up questions.

—Regarding whether "a no-fly zone" would violate Libya's national sovereignty, Wikler in March 2011 stated: "National sovereignty should not be a legitimate barrier to international action when crimes against humanity are being committed." Then in perhaps a foreshadowing of the organization's call for a similar action in Syria, Wikler added: "If you strongly disagree, then you may find yourself at odds with other Avaaz campaigns as well."

Wikler concluded his defense of the call for a Libyan "no-fly zone" by saying: "All told, this was a difficult judgment call. Calling for any sort of military response always is. Avaaz members have been advocating for weeks for a full set of non-military options as well, including an asset freeze, targeted sanctions, and prosecutions of officials involved in the violent crackdown on demonstrators.

"But although those measures are moving forward, the death toll is rising. Again, thoughtful people can disagree – but in the Avaaz community's case, only 9% of our thoughtful people opposed this position [84% approved] – somewhat surprising given that we have virtually always advocated for peaceful methods to resolve conflicts in the past. We think it was the best position to take given the balance of expert opinion, popular support, and most of all, the rights and clearly expressed desire of the Libyan people."

The figure of 84 percent approval from a sampling of Avaaz members seem astounding – and raises the issue of whether the questions were worded in the most emotional ways that would produce such an overwhelming result (along the lines of – Gaddafi is slaughtering, and will slaughter, everyone in his path and we must act now to avert a bloodbath). It also raises the question of whether

Avaaz offered any counterpoints that “a no-fly zone” could lead to a wider war and end up killing, maiming and displacing thousands of civilians.

Regardless of the numbers, relying on partisan civilian sources in embattled areas for tactics or military solutions of any sort is both a dubious and frightening proposition and hardly seems the role for an advocacy organization to undertake.

### **Avaaz’s Origins: Founders and Funders**

Even in the U.S. progressive community, Avaaz is far less well-known than its sister advocacy organization MoveOn.org. To put Avaaz in perspective, a little background is in order.

Avaaz was created in 2006 and officially launched in 2007 by MoveOn.org Civic Action and the little known and closely affiliated global advocacy group Res Publica, Inc. Its initial significant financial backing came from liberal philanthropist George Soros and his Open Society Foundations (then called Open Society Institute).

Avaaz’s individual founders included three of its current officers/directors – Ricken Patel, Eli Pariser and Thomas Pravda – as well as Thomas Perriello, Andrea Woodhouse, Jeremy Heimans, and David Madden. (More about them later.)

If you don’t know much about Avaaz, or think about it as I long did as a non-U.S. entity (actually, its headquarters is in New York City), that is not so surprising since many of its campaigns are targeted to specific countries other than the United States, and only a little over 5 percent of its 43.1 million members are U.S.-based. (A member being anyone who has ever signed an Avaaz petition – and that includes me.)

Still, even that small U.S. percentage equates to 2.3 million people – a number that would be the envy of most U.S. activist organizations. (By way of comparison, Avaaz’s affiliated member organization MoveOn.org claims more than 8-million members.)

The U.S. membership in Avaaz is about the same as the German membership (2.2 million), and far less than France with 4.3 million and Brazil with a whopping 8.8 million members. Other nations with more than one million Avaaz members include Italy (2.1 million), Spain (1.8 million), the United Kingdom (1.6 million), Mexico (1.4 million), Canada (1.2 million). India has 991,000 members and Russia 901,000. Overall, Avaaz claims members in 194 countries, with its smallest membership – 81 – in the British overseas territory of Montserrat, population 5,100.

Avaaz is organized under the name the Avaaz Foundation, a 501(c)(4) non-profit lobbying organization, with its headquarters in Manhattan. It describes itself as having “a simple democratic mission: To close the gap between the world we have and the world most people everywhere want.”

In its most recent Form 990 filing with the Internal Revenue Service, signed in September 2015 for tax year 2014, Avaaz reported contributions totaling \$20.1 million and net assets of \$7.6 million. Avaaz, which says that it is entirely member funded, had previously stated that it accepts no single contribution of more than \$5,000, but that was not the case in 2014 as the organization reported that 18 individuals had contributed amounts ranging from \$5,000 to \$15,383. The contributors were not identified by name in the filing. Since around 2010, the organization is on record as not accepting corporate or foundation donations – although it did receive grants totaling \$1.1 million from George Soros-connected foundations in the three years before that.

In response to our inquiry about Avaaz funding and the organization’s early link to Soros, campaign director Nell Greenberg responded: “With regards to Avaaz funding, this movement was founded with the ideal of being completely self sustaining and democratic. 100% of the Avaaz budget comes from small online donations...Avaaz has never taken a contribution from a government or a corporation, and since 2009 has not solicited any contributions from charitable foundations.”

She continued: “We did receive seed funding from George Soros and the Open Society Foundation, but not after 2009. No corporation, foundation or board member has influence on the organization’s campaign directions or positions. This is hugely important to ensuring that our voice is exclusively determined by the values of our members, and not by any large funder or agenda.”

Of Avaaz’s four current officers/directors, only executive director Ricken Patel was listed as full-time, with annual pay of \$177,666 for 2014. Chairman Eli Pariser; treasurer Thomas Pravda, and secretary Ben Brandzel are not day-to-day employees and all received no compensation in 2014. Of Avaaz’s 77 employees, the five highest-compensated staff members after Patel received salaries ranging between \$111,000 and \$153,000.

For its various domestic and overseas campaigns, Avaaz reported providing \$3.2 million in grants to U.S. organizations and \$932,000 to foreign organizations in 2014. Reported grants of more than \$5,000 came in five categories, with the largest recipients being the U.S. Fund for UNICEF (\$1 million for education for Syrian refugees), and the Rain Forest Trust (\$1 million for “conservation of land and species”).



To help combat the Ebola virus, Avaaz provided \$500,000 to the International Medical Corps, \$350,000 to Save the Children and \$300,000 to Partners in Health. For organizing for the September 2014 People's Climate March in New York City, Avaaz provided \$27,500 to Align and \$10,000 to New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG). Rounding out the list, a \$10,000 grant went to Amazon Watch for "protection of the Amazon."

For activities outside the United States, Avaaz spent most heavily in Europe on campaigns, advertising and consulting – \$6.2 million, with South America a distant second at \$685,000 for consulting services, followed by East Asia and the Pacific with \$553,000 for campaigns and consulting services. Expenditures in five other regions ranged from \$45,000 to \$270,000.

Avaaz reported that the foundation is still comprised of the same two member organizations – MoveOn.org Civic Action and Res Publica, Inc. (U.S.) – which were the original founding groups.

Res Publica, a 501(c)(3), lists the same Manhattan address as the 501(c)(4) Avaaz and presumably provides unspecified assistance to Avaaz. Back at Avaaz's beginning, the three principals in Res Publica were the aforementioned Patel, Pravda and Perriello. The three men had all served with the International Center for Transitional Justice, which "assists countries pursuing accountability for past mass atrocity or human rights abuse." Also in those early days, according to some accounts, Avaaz listed the Service Employees International Union and Australia-based GetUp.org.au as co-founding organizations, but they seem to have long since been out of the picture.

In Res Publica's most recent Form 990 filing with the IRS for 2013, Patel is listed as executive director, Pravda as treasurer, and Vivek Maru as secretary. All received no compensation. Contributions for 2013 totaled \$963,895, of which \$846,165 was from "Government grants" for unspecified purposes. The organization reported that it "provides strategic advice to other non-profit organizations ... [and] also provides educational and action-based e-mail campaigns to citizens in every country via its website." It also reported supporting projects "through fiscal sponsorship, that focused on online security and Internet freedom for repressed communities globally..."

Here are profiles of Avaaz co-founders and past and current officers:

#### **Eli Pariser: Avaaz Chairman and Co-founder**

Eli Pariser was executive director of MoveOn.org from 2004 through 2009 when the organization experienced explosive growth, and has been its board president since then. MoveOn, in the words of an on-line Pariser biography,

“revolutionized grassroots political organizing by introducing a small-donor-funded and email-driven model that has since been widely used across the political spectrum.”

In addition to being a founder of Avaaz and currently serving as its chairman, the Brooklyn-based Pariser has been a member of the boards of Access and the New Organizing Institute. A best-selling author and former fellow at the Roosevelt Institute, Pariser is co-founder and executive of the on-line media company Upworthy. He is also currently a member of the advisory board of George Soros’s Open Society Foundations’ U.S. Programs.

We would note that Pariser appears to be one of the few Avaaz founders and officers whose background is almost entirely in on-line activism, while some others have governmental or otherwise overseas experience working in programs in high poverty and/or war-torn countries.

We submitted several questions to Pariser on March 9, but he has not responded as of this writing.

#### **Ricken Patel: Avaaz Executive Director and Co-founder**

Prior to the founding of Avaaz in 2007, the Canadian-born Ricken Patel consulted for a number of international and well-established non-profit organizations – the International Crisis Group, the United Nations, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Gates Foundation, Harvard University, CARE International, and the International Center for Transitional Justice. He worked in several countries including Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sudan and Afghanistan. He also was the founding executive director of Avaaz-affiliated Res Publica, which among its past projects “worked to end genocide in Darfur.” As executive director of Avaaz since its beginning, Patel is the face of the organization and has been termed “the global leader of online protest” by *The Guardian*.

#### **Thomas Pravda: Avaaz Treasurer and Co-founder**

Through two of its co-founders – Tom Perriello and Thomas Pravda – Avaaz has connections to government officialdom in both the United States and the United Kingdom. Perriello (discussed below) is now with the State Department as U.S. special envoy for the African Great Lakes and the Congo-Kinshasa.

Pravda is currently serving as the (unpaid) treasurer and a director for Avaaz, while at the same time holding down a post as a diplomat with the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office, commonly known as the Foreign Office. He is also co-founder and officer in Res Publica.

As the Foreign Office is “responsible for protecting and promoting British

interests worldwide,” this could raise conflict-of-interest possibilities regarding U.K. and U.S. foreign relations and military issues that might be taken up by Avaaz. This would include the organization’s advocacy for a no-fly zone in Syria, in which both the U.S. and U.K. would be expected to participate. Our research, though, found no example of anyone raising a specific issue about Pravda’s dual role as U.K. diplomat and Avaaz officer, but this relationship looks problematic on the face of it.

Pravda’s self-provided biography shows he has been with the Foreign Office since October 2003, and with Avaaz since 2006, and that he was also an advisor to the U.S. State Department in 2009-2010 regarding the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In his diplomatic assignments Pravda has worked on E.U. trade and development policy; as an advisor to the Special Representative for Climate Change, and as the U.K. Representative in Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo. He has also consulted extensively on political, security, research and advocacy issues for such institutions as the U.S. State Department, the United Nations Development Program, the International Center for Transitional Justice and Oxford Analytica.

#### **Ben Brandzel: Avaaz Secretary and Co-founder**

In addition to currently serving as the (unpaid) secretary for Avaaz, Ben Brandzel is the founder and director of OPEN (Online Progressive Engagement Network), described as an alliance of the world’s leading national digital campaigning organizations. Besides being a founding board member and former senior campaigner at Avaaz, Brandzel is the chief founding advisor for OPEN member groups in the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and Ireland. He also served as the original advocacy director for MoveOn.org and in 2009-2010 directed new media campaigns and fundraising for President Obama during the health reform campaign. He writes frequently on digital organizing and transnational movement building.

#### **Tom Perriello: Avaaz Co-founder**

If I were going to name one chief suspect among Avaaz’s founders as the architect of its “no-fly zone” advocacy in Libya and Syria, it would be Tom Perriello. More than anyone else connected with Avaaz from its earliest days, Perriello, since leaving the organization – first for Congress and then for the think-tank world before going to the U.S. State Department – has shown himself to be a reliable advocate for war: For continuing the war in Afghanistan, for bombing Libya and ousting Gaddafi, and for taking military action to support Syrian rebels and remove Assad from power.

Perriello champions “humanitarian intervention” and lauded the NATO bombing campaign in Libya – before the U.S./NATO “victory” there and before the country subsequently went all to hell – as a prime example of how this approach can succeed .

We asked Avaaz whether Perriello’s thinking had influenced the organization’s campaigns for “no-fly zones” in Libya and Syria, and received a stern denial from Avaaz’s Greenberg: “Tom Perriello, specifically, was an Avaaz board member at the founding of the organization but has not been on the board since December 2009, and has had no role in Avaaz’s Syria campaigns.”

Perriello’s career, like some others with Avaaz, has been more one of public service through established organizations than of activism. According to an on-line biography, in 2002-2003 Perriello was special advisor to the international prosecutor of the Special Court of Sierra Leone, and then served as a consultant to the International Center for Transitional Justice in Kosovo (2003), Darfur (2005) and Afghanistan (2007). In 2004, he co-founded Res Publica with Patel and Pravda. Perriello has also been a fellow at The Century Foundation and is a co-founder of DarfurGenocide.org. He said in his on-line bio that he had “spent much of his career working in West Africa and the Middle East to create strategies for sustainable peace, and he was involved in the peace processes that helped end the civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia.”

A Democrat, Perriello was elected to Congress from Virginia’s 5th District in 2008. (It would appear from the statement we received from Avaaz that if Perriello left the organization in December 2009 then he was still on the Avaaz board during his first year in Congress.)

In his one term, Perriello was a staunch supporter of the global war on terror, the military appropriations to continue U.S. wars, and keeping U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Defeated in his 2010 bid for reelection, Perriello went on to serve as president and CEO of the Center for American Progress Action Fund and counselor for policy also at Center for American Progress, a Democratic party-supporting think tank. From 2014 to the present he has been with the State Department, first as the Special Representative to the Secretary of State for the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, and since last summer as the U.S. special envoy for the African Great Lakes and the Congo-Kinshasa. Although said not to be involved with Avaaz currently, his humanitarian intervention philosophy seems alive and well at Avaaz with its calls for “no-fly zones” in Libya and Syria.

In this excerpt from his 2012 article on humanitarian intervention, Perriello sounds absolutely eager to send in the bombs wherever “egregious atrocities” are

occurring and human beings are suffering. And this, as Perriello writes, would give “progressives” the “opportunity ... to expand the use of force to advance key values.”

Following are two paragraphs from Perriello’s article that give the flavor of the “humanitarian intervention” philosophy he advocates. It would certainly be helpful if Avaaz would tell us if it subscribes to its co-founder’s rather bloodless and creepy prescription for advancing progressives’ “key values.”

“Operational developments since the end of the Cold War have substantially improved our capacity to wage smart military operations that are limited in time and scope and employ precise and overwhelming force,” Perriello wrote. “This presents progressives with an opportunity – one that is too often seen as a curse – to expand the use of force to advance key values.

“Our technical capacities, ranging from accuracy of systems intelligence to smart weaponry, now allow for previously impossible operations. Today, we have the ability to conduct missions from the air that historically would have required ground troops. And we possess an admittedly imperfect but highly improved ability to limit collateral damage, including civilian casualties. Among other things, this means fewer bombs can accomplish the same objectives, with early estimates suggesting that the Libyan air campaign required one-third the number of sorties as earlier air wars..

“We must realize that force is only one element of a coherent national security strategy and foreign policy. We must accept the reality – whether or not one accepts its merits – that other nations are more likely to perceive our motives to be self-interested than values-based. But in a world where egregious atrocities and grave threats exist, and where Kosovo and Libya have changed our sense of what’s now possible, the development of this next generation of power can be seen as a historically unique opportunity to reduce human suffering.”

Imagine the nerve of those other nations Perriello refers to – failing to see that the United States selflessly engages in “values-based” bombing: Bombs for a better world.

#### **Andrea Woodhouse: Avaaz Co-founder**

Another Avaaz co-founder, [Andrea Woodhouse](#), describes herself as a development professional, social entrepreneur and writer. She has worked in many countries experiencing conflict and political transition, including Indonesia, Timor Leste, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Burma/Myanmar. In Indonesia, she reported working on one of the largest anti-poverty programs in the world, which she said became the model for a national program of post-conflict reconstruction

and state-building in Afghanistan. She has worked for the World Bank and the United Nations and was a founder of the World Bank's Justice for the Poor program.

### **Jeremy Heimans: Avaaz Co-founder**

According to an on-line biography, Jeremy Heimans in 2005 co-founded GetUp, an Australian political organization and one of that country's largest campaigning communities. It has campaigned for same-sex marriage and in support of Julian Assange of Wikileaks. In addition to being an Avaaz co-founder, Heimans in 2009 co-founded Purpose, an activist group that launched several major new organizations including All Out, a two-million member LGBT rights group.

### **David Madden: Avaaz Co-founder**

David Madden, another Avaaz co-founder, is a former Australian Army officer and World Bank and United Nations employee. With Jeremy Heimans, he co-founded GetUp. Madden has worked for the World Bank in Timor Leste, and for the United Nations in Indonesia. In 2004, Madden was one of the founders of Win Back Respect, a web-based campaign against the foreign policy of U.S. President George W. Bush.

### **George Soros's Role in Avaaz Early Years**

For the last few years, various on-line bloggers have questioned whether Avaaz is somehow doing the bidding of philanthropist George Soros and his Open Society Foundations, or of the U.S. government (or portions thereof). (See an example [here](#).)

There is no question that there was a close connection between Avaaz and Soros and his organizations dating back to Avaaz's early days, but what – if anything – does that translate into today? As noted earlier, in one of the few of my questions that Avaaz answered directly, there was an acknowledgement of early Soros "seed money" to Avaaz, but a denial of any continuing involvement with the organization.

Of all individuals or organizations outside the Avaaz structure, though, Soros's foundations played the most significant role in helping get Avaaz off the ground with generous grants. Additionally, the Open Society Institute (the previous name of the Open Society Foundations) served as Avaaz's "foundation partner" on campaigns of joint interest, most notably in connection with the Burmese Democracy Movement.

Avaaz still has a Soros connection – notably, as indicated above, Eli Pariser serving on an Open Society advisory board. And both Avaaz and Soros seem to

share an antipathy to what they characterize as “Russian aggression” as exemplified by Avaaz’s sometimes over-the-top statements about Russia in Syria. (For example, as noted in our previous article, Ricken Patel holding Putin’s government responsible for being complicit with the Assad government in “coordinating atrocities” and “targeting the assassinations of journalists” in early 2012. Also, see this Sept. 30, 2015 Avaaz posting using flimsy evidence to accuse Russian planes of deliberately bombing civilian neighborhoods.)

### **Donations by Soros’s Foundations**

Over a three-year period beginning in 2007, Soros’s foundations – either directly or passed through Res Publica – gave Avaaz a total of \$1.2 million. In 2007, the Open Society Institute gave \$150,000 to Res Publica for general support for Avaaz, and \$100,000 for Avaaz’s work on climate change.

In 2008, Open Society Institute again gave a total of \$250,000 to Res Publica – with \$150,000 of that again for general support for Avaaz and the remaining \$100,000 for Avaaz’s climate change work. The following year, Soros was even more generous to Avaaz. His Foundation to Promote Open Society in its Form 990 filing for 2009 (page 87) reported giving a total of \$600,000 to Res Publica for Avaaz’s use – \$300,000 for general support and \$300,000 for climate campaigning.

Avaaz increased its ties to the Soros organization in 2008 by selecting the then-named Open Society Institute (OSI) as its “foundation partner” to oversee some \$325,000 in donations that Avaaz had received from its members – in just four days – to support the Burmese Democracy Movement.

Avaaz said it was linking up with OSI – “one of the largest and most respected foundations in the world” – for the purpose of OSI monitoring Avaaz’s grant awards and expenditures. OSI was “taking no overhead on the funds we are granting to Burmese groups” for technology, organizing, support for the regime’s victims and victims’ families, and international advocacy.

In June 2009, OSI reported that its Burma Project grantees – including Avaaz – had rallied global support around democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. On that occasion, Avaaz partnered with the Free Burma’s Political Prisoners Now! Campaign to collect more than 670,000 signatures asking for UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon’s support for Aung San Suu Kyi and some 2,000 other political prisoners.

From available information, it does not appear Soros or his foundations have contributed financially to Avaaz or directly engaged in projects with the organization in the last five to six years. And Avaaz itself says the Soros

financial connection ended in 2009. Whether the substantial assistance Soros's foundations gave Avaaz in its first three years of existence carries any lasting influence, though, is certainly hard to show.

### **Avaaz's Impressive Record of Advocacy**

As noted in our previous article, even allowing for organizational self-hype, Avaaz has an impressive record of advocacy – a record that mostly seems off-kilter with its “no-fly zone” advocacy in Libya and Syria. For example, here are some other Avaaz campaigns not previously mentioned:

–Avaaz has played a prominent role in a number of actions directed at Israel's treatment of Palestinians.

–Avaaz was a key player in a successful campaign (including a petition with more than 1.7 million signatures, coupled with occupations and protests at some 15 Barclays bank branches across the United Kingdom) to pressure Barclays to divest its \$2.9 million holdings in an Israeli defense contractor, Elbit Systems.

Avaaz received plaudits from the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement for its role in that campaign. Elbit Systems is the major Israeli-based arms and security company that manufactures drones used in surveillance and attacks on Palestinians in Gaza. It also provides electronics for the “apartheid wall” being constructed on the West Bank.

–A petition directed to the government of Israel and to the U.S. Congress netted 185,000 signatures in support of the portion of President Obama's Cairo speech in June 2009 in which he said: “The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements. This construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop.”

–In 2011, some 1.6 million people – more than 300,000 of them in just the first two days – signed an Avaaz petition to European leaders and U.N. member states, urging them “to endorse the legitimate bid for recognition of the state of Palestine and the reaffirmation of the rights of the Palestinian people. It is time to turn the tide on decades of failed peace talks, end the occupation and move towards peace based on two states.”

–In March 2013, at the time of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's (AIPAC's) annual conference and congressional lobbying days in Washington, D.C., Avaaz joined with Jewish Voice for Peace to erect hundreds of anti-AIPAC posters across Metro stations in central D.C. The signs read: “AIPAC does not speak for me. Most Jewish Americans are pro-peace. AIPAC is not.”



–Through its petitions, Avaaz has strongly opposed governmental surveillance of U.S. citizens, and has defended Wikileaks and national security whistleblowers Edward Snowden and Chelsea (formerly Bradley) Manning.

–In April 2011, amid news reports of Manning’s brutal treatment while imprisoned at Marine Corps Base Quantico in Virginia before facing a court martial for providing classified documents to Wikileaks, almost 550,000 people signed an Avaaz petition to President Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. The petition, headlined “Stop Wikileaks Torture,” called on those officials “to immediately end the torture, isolation and public humiliation of Bradley Manning. This is a violation of his constitutionally guaranteed human rights, and a chilling deterrent to other whistleblowers committed to public integrity.”

–A December 2010 Avaaz petition, calling “the vicious intimidation campaign against Wikileaks” by the U.S. and other governments and corporations “a dangerous attack on freedom of expression and freedom of the press,” produced 654,000 signatures – more than 300,000 of those in the first 24 hours the petition was circulated on-line.

–In June 2013, just days after the first reports of the National Security Agency’s illegal worldwide spying appeared, some 1.38 million people signed a petition, headlined “Stand with Edward Snowden,” to President Obama. The petition read: “We call on you to ensure that whistleblower Edward Snowden is treated fairly, humanely and given due process. The PRISM program is one of the greatest violations of privacy ever committed by a government. We demand that you terminate it immediately, and that Edward Snowden be recognized as a whistleblower acting in the public interest – not as a dangerous criminal.”

–In April 2012, some 780,000 people signed an Avaaz petition to members of Congress, and another to Facebook, Microsoft and IBM (with 626,000 signers), to drop their support for the Internet surveillance bill known as the Cyber Intelligence Sharing and Protection Act (CISPA). The bill, the petition stated, would place “Our democracy and civil liberties...under threat from the excessive and unnecessary Internet surveillance powers” that it would grant to the U.S. government without requirement of a warrant.

–In the face of widespread hunger strikes at the Guantanamo Bay prison in 2013, Avaaz gathered 690,000 signatures on a petition to transfer the 86 men who had already been cleared for release, and to appoint a White House official whose responsibility it would be to close down the prison. Said the petition: “This shameful complex is a scourge on humanity, is destroying lives, and fuels hate across the world. Close it down!”

–Avaaz is also in the front ranks on various other issues – fighting global warming, seeking an end to U.S. and European arms sales to Saudi Arabia, protecting rain forests, saving endangered species, promoting clean energy, challenging Rupert Murdoch’s bid for a greater media monopoly in the United Kingdom, defending human rights in a number of countries, etc.

In none of those other campaigns do we see Avaaz proposing military action of any sort. Why this anomaly when it came to Libya and now Syria? Especially, when military action’s aftermath turned out so badly in Libya, and when even the nation’s leading generals say a Syria “no-fly zone” would escalate the war and endanger the very civilians Avaaz has the stated goal of protecting?

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**<https://exposefacts.org/avaaz-ignores-libya-lessons-in-advocating-for-syria-no-fly-zone/> ]**

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