

How Trump Got the Iran Deal Wrong

Election 2016 will be remembered for its slurs, lies and weirdness polluting the public debate, but one of the worst examples has been Donald Trump's smearing of the Iran nuclear deal, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Among the lingering effects of this awful election campaign season will be widespread misunderstanding of serious issues of foreign policy, beyond even the habitually low baseline public understanding of many such issues.

With Donald Trump making clear in the second presidential candidates' debate that his approach for the remaining four weeks of the campaign will be to sustain a barrage of accusations and assertions in which the quantity of accusations is given greater emphasis than their correspondence with reality, there will be both more material for misunderstandings and less time and space for correcting them.

In the debate, the sheer volume of misrepresentations meant Hillary Clinton was again reduced to referring people to her website for fact-checking – and even then the proportion of the debate devoted to serious discussion of public policy, foreign or domestic, was distressingly small.

The problem is not just one of specific erroneous assertions of the type that a fact-checker can grab hold of. It is a broader problem of misrepresentation that consists of context, innuendo, and omission as much as bald-faced lies. Effects in the minds of the public will outlast the election regardless of the election result.

Many citizens – including perhaps some of those suburban women in Pennsylvania who seem to have become a fashionable political bellwether – who decide they do not want a misogynist (or worse) in the White House and vote accordingly will still have lasting misperceptions, or will have existing misperceptions reinforced, on some issues partly because of things Donald Trump has said during the campaign.

Consider, as one such important foreign policy topic, the agreement to restrict Iran's nuclear program. This is an instance of reinforcement of earlier misrepresentation, because there has been much said over the past couple of years with the objective of killing the agreement, even before Trump started his campaign.

For the Republican Party as a whole, the nuclear agreement has a place in

foreign policy that corresponds to the Affordable Care Act in domestic policy: i.e., a signature accomplishment of Barack Obama's administration, and thus something Republicans have been determined to destroy. (This is in addition to the strong political effects in the United States of the rightist government in Israel opposing, for other reasons, any business done with Iran.)

Thus what could have been a useful election season discussion of the best ways to advance U.S. interests while following up on the nuclear agreement has not taken place.

Even the fact-checkers who presumably try to be objective have not always done a good job in handling how candidates have mishandled the subject of the nuclear agreement. This was true of some of the fact-checking of the vice-presidential candidates' debate, in which fact-checkers sloppily conflated "nuclear program" with "nuclear weapons program."

Perhaps the fact-checking will be somewhat better regarding what was said on the topic in the latest presidential candidates' debate. ABC News, for example, is to be commended not only for picking up on Trump's misstatement about the size of sanctions relief that Iran has gotten but also for assessing that Trump's characterization of the agreement as "one-sided" was false "considering the changes Iran has made to its nuclear program, including an agreement to reduce its stockpile of enriched nuclear material and to cease further enrichment, effectively extending the time it would take Iran to build a bomb from a few months to one year."

(Many in Iran, disappointed that the economic benefits Iran has gotten seem small in return for the concessions it made, would say the transaction was one-sided in the other direction.)

There is more that a thorough auditing of what the candidates said on this subject in the debate would have highlighted. Trump referred to \$1.7 billion in cash as if that payment were part of the nuclear agreement, whereas in fact it was part of a settlement of claims dating back to the time of the shah. He also used the reference in a way that probably fed the misconception that this was money from U.S. taxpayers when instead it was Iran's money all along.

Misunderstanding Iran/Russia

Trump also seemed to say that another consequence of the nuclear agreement was that "Iran and Russia are now against us." That's a strange suggestion given that the work on the nuclear agreement exhibited some of the closest and most effective U.S.-Russian cooperation in recent years, and that Russia and Iran hardly needed any stimulus to be working on the same side in the Syrian civil

war.

If anything, a rejection of U.S. diplomacy with Iran would leave more of an open field to the Russians to do diplomatic and commercial business in the Middle East.

For the average American voter, what needs to be said about the nuclear agreement with Iran does not need to get into details of decades-old claims settlements, but it does need to offer a bit more than Clinton's one-sentence comment in the debate about putting "a lid on the Iranian nuclear program without firing a single shot." The essential points that need to be made are these:

–For years before negotiations began, Iran was spinning more centrifuges and enriching more uranium and getting ever closer to the capability of making a nuclear weapon. This process continued even as the United States loaded more and more sanctions on Iran.

–The agreement stopped this process and has blocked all of Iran's paths toward making a nuclear weapon. This has included not only the enriched uranium path but also the plutonium path, blocked with measures such as gutting a reactor.

–The agreement has established the most extensive and intrusive international nuclear inspection regime that any nation has subjected itself to.

–The inspectors report that so far, more than a year after the agreement entered into force, Iran is completely in compliance with its obligations.

–No one has presented any plausible alternative to the agreement that would block development of an Iranian nuclear weapon any more effectively. The alternative to this laboriously negotiated agreement would be no agreement: a return to the previous situation in which Iran was spinning ever more centrifuges, acquiring more of the material to build a bomb, and subject to much less inspection than it is now.

But we're probably not going to hear such things during the rest of this election campaign. Especially not when one of the candidates sees his only strategy as throwing as much mud as he can at the other candidate during the remaining four weeks.

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Donald Trump Stalks Hillary Clinton

Since Richard Nixon's Southern Strategy, the Republican Party has padded its numbers by playing to America's basest instincts, leading now to the stark image of Donald Trump almost stalking Hillary Clinton, notes Michael Winship.

By Michael Winship

If there was the tiniest doubt left in your mind that Donald Trump holds no regard for the principles and ideals of a representative democracy – or that he views this country as anything more than a podium for his grandstanding ego, base dictatorial instincts and gutter mentality – Sunday night's debate should have shot that shred of doubt straight to hell.

It was not enough for Trump that he continue to slime our airwaves and the Internet with his offensive rants and tweets or that he responded to the 2005 videotape of his sexist, brutish behavior with a non-apology apology that segued into yet another attack on the Clintons. Which in turn segued into that bizarre, tabloid-style press conference just before Sunday's debate with four women accusing not only Bill Clinton, but Hillary Clinton as well, of abusive conduct.

Which in turn segued into the debate itself. ([The Washington Post reported](#) that the Trump campaign wanted to seat the four accusers in the candidates' family box so that Bill and Chelsea Clinton would have to confront them but the Commission on Presidential Debates intervened and refused. The women were seated elsewhere in the auditorium.)

This is what Trump and his gang have turned this election into: a cheap, tawdry burlesque; a circus sideshow of freaks and conspiracy nuts that titillates the lowest of the lowest common denominator and has made us the laughingstock of what's left of the free, thinking world.

This is not to excuse any of Bill Clinton's past extramarital peccadilloes, or the Clintons' preservation of the status quo, their bear-hug embrace of money and influence. Nor does it let off the hook the members of the press and their corporate higher-ups who egged on this Trump sleaze machine.

But the Republican Party? You brought this on yourselves, boys and girls. For years now you have placed party, power and privilege above patriotism and country, feeding hatred and bigotry to advance your own agenda. Even before that tape came out last Friday, you knew who Trump was and is. You have always known. You just didn't care as long as it seemed he would lead you to victory.

And so, there he was on the debate stage Sunday night, fresh from his crude and

nasty press event with the women accusers, lurking and hulking across the stage like some Presbyterian golem, slinging mud, flagrant falsehoods and invective like so much gorilla dust. Those crass comments he made on the “Access Hollywood” bus? Just locker room talk, he insisted, and not the behavior of a man who regards women as trophies and playthings.

After Sunday’s debate, pundits gave him points for being slightly less ludicrous than he seemed in the first one, and he managed with some effect to work in all the standard anti-Clinton attack lines on Syria, Obamacare and emails.

But mostly, Sunday will go down as the night he accused Hillary Clinton of having “hate in her heart” and being “the devil,” announcing that if elected, he would throw her in jail, like the tinhorn wannabe despot he is. He hurled a kitchen sink containing every dirty pot and pan he could conjure, hoping something, anything, would knock her out. Nothing did. But nothing in that hour-and-a-half knocked him out either.

This is worse than a simple embarrassment. Hurricane Donald has devastated America, tearing us from our foundations and moorings, creating havoc and letting loose the wolves of prejudice, hate, fear and greed.

When this whole sorry mess is – hopefully – settled on Election Night, we all are going to need to conduct some serious inventory, taking a long hard look at ourselves and why this has happened, initiating a national dialogue and putting in place every step necessary to rebuild and save the nation from its near-death experience.

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[http://billmoyers.com/story/second-presidential-debate-monster-calls/.](http://billmoyers.com/story/second-presidential-debate-monster-calls/)]

A First-Hand Account of Women’s Boat to Gaza

For almost a decade, Israel has maintained a blockade of Gaza and its nearly 2 million people, preventing even humanitarian missions such as the capture this month of the Women’s Boat to Gaza, as Ann Wright describes.

By Ann Wright

Five hours after our Women's Boat to Gaza, the Zaytouna-Oliva, was stopped in international waters by the misnamed Israeli Defense Force (more appropriately called the Israeli Occupation Force), the coast of Gaza came into view. The Gaza shoreline was starkly visible – for its darkness.

The contrast was startling between the bright lights of the Israeli coast – from the border city of Ashkelon north to Tel Aviv and beyond – to the Gaza coast, south of Ashkelon, shrouded in black. The electricity shortages caused by the Israeli control of much of the electrical network of Gaza condemns the Palestinians in Gaza to a life of minimal electricity for refrigeration, for pumping of water from roof tanks to kitchens and bathroom, and for study. It condemns the people of Gaza to a night, every night, in darkness.

Among those the bright lights of Israel live 8 million Israeli citizens. In the Israeli-controlled darkness in the small 25-mile-long, 5-mile-wide Gaza Strip live 1.9 million Palestinians. The internationally isolated enclave called Gaza has almost one quarter of the population of Israel yet is kept in virtually perpetual darkness by the policies of the State of Israel, which also limits the amount of water, food, construction and medical supplies that go into Gaza.

Israel attempts to keep the Palestinians in yet another type of darkness, by imprisoning them in Gaza, severely limiting their ability to travel for education, medical reasons and family visits – and for the pure joy of visiting other peoples and lands.

Trying to sail two boats in 20 days from Barcelona to Gaza with stops at two ports was fraught with challenges including replacing one boat, Amal or Hope, whose engine failed upon departing Barcelona, readjusting from one boat to another passengers who had flown into the ports from all over the world, replacing things that broke during the voyage including a metal rod shroud by a professional Greek rigger brought to the Zaytouna-Oliva off Crete for an at sea repair of the shroud. (The boat in this video is filled with Greek activists who brought the rigger to our boat and helped replenish our fuel supply.)

During the days on the Zaytouna-Oliva and especially on the last three days, our satellite phones rang virtually continuously with interviews with media from all over the world. Our participants described why each felt it was important to be on the voyage. The exception to media coverage of the Women's Boat to Gaza was the U.S. media that did not call for interviews and gave very little information to the citizens of the country that most supports Israel and its policies that oppress and imprison Palestinians.

At the end of our 15-day, 1,715-mile voyage from Barcelona, Spain, around 3 p.m. on Oct. 5, we began to see the outlines of three large naval vessels on the

horizon. At 3:30 p.m., Israeli naval forces began radio broadcasts to the Women's Boat to Gaza, crackling with "Zaytouna, Zaytouna. This is the Israeli Navy. You are heading for an internationally recognized Security Zone. You must stop and divert to Ashdod, Israel or your boat will be forcibly stopped by the Israeli Navy and your boat will be confiscated."

Our Captain Madeline Habib, an extraordinarily experienced captain licensed to command all ships of any size responded, "Israeli Navy, this is the Zaytouna, the Women's Boat to Gaza. We are in international waters heading for Gaza on a mission of bringing hope to the people of Gaza that they are not forgotten. We demand that the government of Israel end its naval blockade of Gaza and let the people of Palestine live in dignity with the right to travel freely and the right to control their destiny. We are continuing to sail to Gaza where the people of Gaza are awaiting our arrival."

Vessels Approaching

Around 4 p.m., we saw three vessels coming at high speed toward the Zaytouna. As planned during our frequent nonviolence training discussions, we gathered all 13 women in the cockpit of the Zaytouna. Two journalists of Al Jazeera, who had been reporting daily on the progress of the Zaytouna during the final nine day voyage, continued their filming, while our Captain and two crew members sailed the boat toward Gaza.

As the Israeli fast boats approached, our participants held hands and had a minute of silence and reflection for the women and children of Gaza and our voyage to bring international attention to their plight.

By 4:10 p.m., the Israeli boats had come along side of the Zaytouna and ordered us to slow to 4 knots. The Israeli zodiac vessel had approximately 25 people on board including ten women sailors. Fifteen young Israeli sailors quickly boarded the Zaytouna and a woman sailor took command of the Zaytouna from our Captain and altered our course from Gaza to the Israeli port of Ashdod.

The sailors did not carry visible weapons, although there probably were weapons and handcuffs in the backpacks that several brought onboard. They were not dressed in combat gear, but rather in white long sleeved polo shirts with blue military vests on top and Go-Pro cameras attached to the vests.

They immediately took our individual document belts that contained our passports and stored them below as they searched the boat. Later a second team searched the boat more thoroughly apparently looking for cameras, computers, mobile phones and any electronic devices.

A young Israeli female medic asked if anyone had medical problems. We replied

that we had our own medical doctor on board – and the medic said, “Yes, we know, Dr. Fauziah Hasan from Malaysia.”

The boarding group brought aboard water and offered us food. We replied that we had plenty of water and food, including 60 hard boiled eggs that we had prepared for what we knew would be a lengthy journey to an Israeli port after the boarding.

For the next eight hours until after midnight, we sailed and motored with 15 more people on board, a total of about 28 people on the Zaytouna-Oliva. As was typical at virtually every sunset on our nine-day journey from Messina, our crew sang to remind us of the women of Palestine.

Crewmember Emma Ringquist had composed a powerful song entitled “For the Women of Gaza.” Emma, Synne Sofia and Marmara Davidson sang the lyrics as we sailed with the sun setting for the final evening on the Zaytouna Oliva, the Women’s Boat to Gaza with everyone singing the chorus that so aptly described our mission: “We will sail for your freedom our sisters in Palestine. We will never be silent until you are free.”

Deportation Orders

After arriving in Ashdod, we were charged with entering Israel illegally and presented with a deportation order. We told the immigration officials that we had been kidnapped in international waters by the Israeli Occupation Force and brought to Israel against our will and refused to sign any documents or agree to pay for our air tickets to leave Israel. We were sent to the immigration and deportation processing jail at Givon and after lengthy processing finally arrived at our cells around 5 a.m. on Oct. 6.



We demanded to see the Israeli lawyers that had agreed to represent us and to

also see representatives of our respective Embassies. By 3 p.m., we had spoken to both and had agreed to the legal advice to write on the deportation order that we were in Israel against our will. By 6 p.m., we were taken to the deportation jail at Ben Gurion International Airport and Israeli officials began putting our Women's Boat to Gaza participants and crew on flights to their home countries. The Al Jazeera journalists had been deported to their homes in the UK and Russia the evening we arrived in Israel.

All of our participants and crew, who have now arrived safely to their homes, are committed to continuing to speak out strongly about the conditions in Gaza and the West Bank and demand that Israel and the international community bring Gaza out of the darkness imposed by their policies.

We know our voyage was important to the people of Gaza. The photos of preparations for our arrival and videos that thank us for our efforts have been heartwarming. As the young Palestinian woman said, "It doesn't matter that the boats are towed (to Israel) and the passengers deported. Just knowing that supporters are still willing to keep trying (to get to Gaza) is enough."

Many Participants

The long voyage of the Women's Boat to Gaza was to bring hope to the people of Gaza that they are not forgotten by the international community. The women and men supporting the Women's Boat to Gaza are committed to continuing their efforts by sending international delegations by boat to Gaza to put international pressure on the Israeli government to change its policies toward Gaza and to lift the inhumane and brutal naval and land blockade of Gaza.

The Women's Boat to Gaza, the Zaytouna Oliva, set sail from Barcelona, Spain on Sept. 15 to bring international attention to this Israeli-imposed darkness. We sailed with 13 women on our initial voyage, a three-day trip to Ajaccio, Corsica, France. Our captain was Madeline Habib from Australia, who has decades of captaining and sailing experience recently as the Captain of the Dignity, a Doctors Without Borders ship that rescues migrants from North Africa.

Our crewmembers were Emma Ringqvist from Sweden and Synne Sofia Reksten from Norway. The international participants selected to be on this part of the journey were Rosana Pastor Muñoz, member of Parliament and actor from Spain; Malin Bjork, member of the European Parliament from Sweden; Paulina de los Reyes, a Swedish professor originally from Chile; Jaldia Abubakra, Palestinian from Gaza now a Spanish citizen and political activist; Dr. Fauziah Hasan, medical doctor from Malaysia; Yehudit Ilany, political consultant and journalist from Israel; Lucia Muñoz, Spanish journalist with Telesur; Kit Kittredge, U.S. human rights and Gaza activist. Wendy Goldsmith, Canadian social-worker human

rights campaigner, and Ann Wright, retired U.S. Army Colonel and former U.S. diplomat were designated by the Women's Boat to Gaza organizers as co-leaders of the boat.

Other participants who had flown to Barcelona but were unable to sail due to the breakdown of the second boat, Amal-Hope, were Zohar Chamberlain Regev, a German and Israeli citizen resident in Spain, and Ellen Huttu Hansson from Sweden, boat co-leaders from the international Freedom Coalition; internationally recognized non-violence trainer Lisa Fithian from the U.S.; Norsham Binti Abubakr, medical administrator from Malaysia; Palestinian activist Gail Miller from the U.S.; and crew members Laura Pastor Solera from Spain, Marilyn Porter from Canada and Josefin Westman from Sweden. Ivory Hackett-Evans, a boat captain from the United Kingdom, flew to Barcelona and then to Messina from work with migrants in Greece to help find another boat in Sicily to replace the Amal-Hope.

A new group of women joined us in Ajaccio, Corsica, France for the 3.5-day trip from to Messina, Sicily, Italy. Besides our crew, the participants were boat co-leaders Wendy Goldsmith from Canada and Ann Wright from the U.S.; medical doctor Dr. Fauziah Hasan from Malaysia; Latifa Habbechi, member of Parliament from Tunisia; Khadija Benguenna, Al Jazeera journalist and broadcaster from Algeria; Heyet El-Yamani, Al Jazeera Mubasher On-Line journalist from Egypt; Yehudit Ilany, political consultant and journalist from Israel; Lisa Gay Hamilton, TV actor and activist from the United States; Norsham Binti Abubakr, medical administrator from Malaysia; and Kit Kittredge, U.S. human rights and Gaza activist.

A third group of women sailed for nine days and 1,000 miles from Messina, Sicily, to 34.2 miles from Gaza before the Israeli military stopped us in international waters, 14.2 miles outside the illegal 20-mile Israeli imposed "Security Zone" that limits access to Palestine's only port located at Gaza City. The eight women participants were Nobel Peace Laureate from Northern Ireland Mairead Maguire; Algerian Parliamentarian Samira Douaifia; New Zealand Parliamentarian Marama Davidson; Swedish First Substitute Member of the Swedish Parliament Jeanette Escanilla Diaz (originally from Chile); South African Olympic athlete and university student rights activist Leigh Ann Naidoo; Spanish professional photographer Sandra Barriaroloro; Malaysian medical doctor Fauziah Hasan; Al Jazeera journalists British Mena Harballou and Russian Hoda Rakhme; and Ann Wright. Also onboard were the three crew members: Captain Madeleine Habib, Emma Ringqvist and Synne Sofia Reksten.

While the Zaytouna-Olivia sailed to Sicily, our international coalition attempted to find a second boat to continue the mission to Gaza. Despite great efforts, ultimately a second boat could not be fully crewed due to the delayed

timeline and many women who traveled from around the world to Messina were unable to go on the final voyage to Gaza.

That group's participants were Çigdem Topçuoğlu, a professional athlete and trainer from Turkey who sailed in 2010 on the Mavi Marmara where her husband was killed; Naomi Wallace, playwright of Palestinian issues and author from the U.S.; Gerd von der Lippe, athlete and professor from Norway; Eva Manly, retired documentary maker and human rights activist from Canada; Efrat Lachter, TV journalist from Israel; Orly Noy, online journalist from Israel; Jaldia Abubakra, Palestinian from Gaza now a Spanish citizen and political activist; boat co-leaders from the international Freedom Coalition Zohar Chamberlain Regev, a German and Israeli citizen resident in Spain, Ellen Huttu Hansson from Sweden, Wendy Goldsmith from Canada; and crew members Sofia Kanavle from the U.S., Maite Mompó from Spain and Siri Nysten from Sweden.

Many members of the Women's Boat to Gaza steering committee and national and organization campaign organizers traveled to Barcelona, Ajaccio and/or Messina to help with media, ground preparations, logistics and delegate support. Many other local volunteers in each port opened their homes and their hearts to our travelers, participants and support crew.

At each of our stops, local organizers arranged for public events for the participants. In Barcelona, organizers had three afternoons of public events at the Barcelona harbor with the Mayor of Barcelona speaking at the farewell ceremony for the boats. In Ajaccio a local band entertained the public.

In Messina, Sicily, Renato Accorinti, the Mayor of Messina hosted various events in the City Hall, including an international press conference for the departure of the Women's Boat to Gaza on its final 1,000-mile leg of the journey to Gaza.

The local Palestinian support group in Messina arranged a concert at the city hall with Palestinian, international and local artists. And the Palestinian Ambassador to Italy Doctor Mai Alkaila traveled to Messina to visit the boats and offer her support.

Ann Wright is a retired US Army Reserve Colonel and a former US diplomat who resigned in 2003 in opposition to the Iraq war. She has been to Gaza six times and participated in the 2009 Gaza Freedom March and the 2010, 2011 and 2015 Gaza Freedom Flotillas.

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Robert Parry is a longtime investigative reporter who broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for the Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. He founded

Consortiumnews.com in 1995 to create an outlet for well-reported journalism that was being squeezed out of an increasingly trivialized U.S. news media.

Hillary Clinton: Candidate of War

Exclusive: The U.S. political/media establishment only permits the propaganda version of the Syrian conflict – and Hillary Clinton fully embraced it in her belligerent comments in the second presidential debate, writes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

In case there was still any uncertainty, Hillary Clinton banished all doubt in her second debate with Donald Trump. A vote for her is a vote not only for war, but for war on behalf of Al Qaeda.

This is clear from her response to ABC reporter Martha Raddatz's painfully loaded question about the Syrian conflict. With Raddatz going on about the hundreds killed by the evil twins, Bashar al-Assad and Putin and even tossing in the Holocaust for good measure, Clinton saw no reason to hold back:

“Well, the situation in Syria is catastrophic and every day that goes by we see the results of the regime – by Assad in partnership with the Iranians on the ground, the Russians in the air – bombarding places, in particular Aleppo where there are hundreds of thousands of people, probably about 250,000 still left, and there is a determined effort by the Russian air force to destroy Aleppo in order to eliminate the last of the Syrian rebels who are really holding out against the Assad regime.

“Russia hasn't paid any attention to ISIS. They're interested in keeping Assad in power. So I, when I was secretary of state, advocated, and I advocate today, a no-fly-zone and safe zones. ... But I want to emphasize that what is at stake here is the ambitions and the aggressiveness of Russia. Russia has decided that it's all in in Syria, and they've also decided who they want to see become president of the United States too, and it's not me. I stood up to Russia, I've taken on Putin and others, and I would do that as president.”

It was an astonishing performance, even for a presidential debate. Rarely have more lies and misstatements been crammed into a single two-minute statement.

Where to begin? For starters, there are not 250,000 people in Aleppo, but

somewhere around 1.75 million, only a small portion of whom live in a rebel-controlled enclave in the city's east. Despite Clinton's claim that Russia is trying to "destroy Aleppo," most of the city manages to carry on quite peacefully despite rebel "hell cannons" lobbing explosive-packed gas canisters into government-controlled areas at regular intervals.

"One of the most striking things about Aleppo," *New York Times* reporter Declan Walsh wrote last May, "is how much of the city appears to be functioning relatively normally. Much of the periphery has been reduced to rubble. But in the city center, I saw people on the sidewalks, traffic flowing, hotels and cafes with plenty of customers, and universities and schools open for students."

Not so in the rebel-held east, however. Juan Cole described the area as "a bombed-out slum," a ghost town with a population conceivably as low as "a few tens of thousands." Life under the rebels is "miserable," he went on. "Some neighborhoods are controlled by Al-Qaeda, some by the hard line Salafi Jihadi 'Freemen of Syria' (Ahrar al-Sham), some by militias of, essentially, the Muslim Brotherhood."

The Truth About the Rebels

Although Clinton seems to regard such elements as valiant freedom fighters, a U.S. Defense Department spokesman confirmed last April that Al Nusra, Al Qaeda's affiliate that recently renamed itself Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, or the Syria Conquest Front, was firmly in charge. "It's primarily al-Nusra who holds Aleppo," Col. Steve Warren told a press briefing.

When Secretary of State John Kerry tried to persuade "moderate" rebel forces to sever ties with Al Nusra during last month's brief ceasefire, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that some of the largest factions responded by "doubling down on their alliance" and drawing even closer to Al Qaeda. In other words, they flipped Kerry the bird.

The people Clinton supports are thus the same forces that brought down the World Trade Center 15 years ago, killing nearly 3,000 people and triggering a global war on terror that has allowed Al Qaeda to metastasize across half the globe, including its spinoff group, the Islamic State or ISIS.

The statement that "Russia hasn't paid any attention to ISIS" was similarly bizarre. When ISIS converged on Palmyra, in central Syria, in May 2015, it was the U.S. that held off bombing even though the ISIS fighters would have made perfect targets as they crossed miles of open desert. Why didn't the United States attack and possibly keep the antiquities of Palmyra out of ISIS's hands?

Explained *The New York Times*: "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.”

In other words, the U.S. allowed ISIS to take one of the richest archeological sites in the Middle East even though it could have stopped it in its tracks. By the same token, it was Russian air strikes – some of the heaviest, in fact, since Moscow entered the war in September 2015 – that enabled Syrian forces to retake the city the following March.

The idea that Russia doesn’t care about ISIS stood reality on its head. Moreover, when U.S. jets killed at least 62 government soldiers outside the ISIS-besieged town of Deir Ezzor last month, ISIS took advantage by launching an offensive just minutes after the bombing had ceased.

So, by holding its fire in the case of Palmyra and unleashing it in the case of Deir Ezzor, Washington – inadvertently or not – enables ISIS to advance and then gets huffy when anyone objects. As U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power declared when Russia dared call an emergency U.N. Security Council meeting in response: “Even by Russia’s standards, tonight’s stunt, a stunt replete with moralism and grandstanding, is uniquely cynical and hypocritical.”

The words were shocking not only because scores of people were dead, but also because Power was defending a bombing raid that had taken place on Syrian territory in flagrant violation of international law. While Syria’s sovereign government has requested Russia’s assistance, it has objected to the violation of its territory by the United States and its allies. That means the U.S. coalition has no legal right, under international law, to be operating in or over Syria.

Dangerous Escalation

As for the “no-fly zone” that Clinton invoked, Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, warned in early 2012 that it would mean mobilizing as many as 70,000 US military personnel to neutralize Syria’s extensive anti-aircraft network – and that was before Russia decided to buttress Syria’s defenses by installing sophisticated S-300 and S-400 missiles. A “no-fly-zone” also would be an act of war in which the U.S. would not only have to fire on Syrian forces, but on Russian and Iranian forces, too. Instead of peace, the result would be a vast escalation.

Finally, Clinton’s reflexive Russia-bashing showed just how bellicose her

worldview has become. If Trump was the first person in a presidential debate to threaten a rival with jail, Clinton was the first to label her opponent an agent of a hostile foreign power.

Yet, Clinton's efforts to blame Russia for the Syria debacle make little sense. After all, Russia didn't enter the war until September 2015, more than four years after the blood had started to flow. Rather than ambitions and aggressiveness, it's clear that its concerns are far more practical. Russian President Putin knows all too well that if Assad falls, it will be a repeat of the Taliban victory in Afghanistan in 1996, but on a far grander scale.

As Alastair Crooke, a diplomat and veteran of British military intelligence, observed in late 2015, Putin sees Syria as "Russia's veritable front line":

"Russia recalls how, after the Afghan war, radical Wahhabi-style Islam spread out from Afghanistan and reached up into Central Asia. Russia also recalls how the CIA and Saudi Arabia inflamed and used the Chechen insurgency to weaken Russia. ...

"But equally, President Putin shares the perception of many in the region that America and its allies are not serious about defeating ISIS. And sensing that the West was finally about to be lured by Turkey toward a no-fly zone – which would only end, as it did in Libya, in chaos – Putin played his surprise hand: he entered the war on 'terrorism,' blocked Turkey's project to 're-Ottomize' northern Syria, and challenged the West to join with him in the venture."

The idea was to force the U.S. into waging a real war against violent Salafists who were threatening Russia via its soft underbelly. If so, the effort backfired since the only thing it accomplished was to anger Washington's hardline foreign-policy establishment, which will undoubtedly be beside itself with fury if the rebels in east Aleppo are defeated.

Trump's Foggy Account

Trump, fatuous businessman that he is, mostly seemed lost in a fog of his own making. Once or twice, though, he seemed to have a glimmer of an idea of what was at stake. "Now, she talks tough," he said of Clinton:

"She talks really tough against Putin and against Assad. She talks in favor of the rebels. She doesn't even know who the rebels are. You know, every time we take rebels whether it's in Iraq or anywhere else, we're arming people. And you know what happens? They end up being worse than the people [they overthrow]. Look at what she did in Libya with Gaddafi. Gaddafi is out. It's a mess. And by the way, ISIS has a good chunk of their oil. I'm sure you've probably heard that. It was a disaster. The fact is almost everything she has done has been a

mistake and it's been a disaster."

Trump's comment was correct, more or less. Either Clinton doesn't know who the rebels are or is so consumed by enmity for Putin and Assad that she doesn't care.

Trump was also right that rebels often turn out to be worse than the strongmen they topple. In real life, Muammar Gaddafi was a grotesque goon. But compared to some of the Salafist head choppers who have filled the resulting power void in Libya, he seems more like Desmond Tutu in retrospect.

Much the same can be said for Assad. Arguably, he is little more than a Syrian Michael Corleone. But after somehow managing to survive five years of a U.S.-Turkish-Saudi onslaught – and in comparison to the barbarous Al Qaeda and ISIS fanatics operating in Syria – he now seems like Nelson Mandela.

In any event, Hillary Clinton has made it crystal clear. Anyone who votes for her is voting for greatly expanded warfare in the Middle East and probably military confrontation with Russia elsewhere as well. As bad as things are in Syria, in a few months they could get a lot worse. Don't say you weren't warned.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Yes, Hillary Clinton Is a Neocon.](#)"]

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Low-Brow Debate Skirts Meaningful Issues

Brushing aside key issues, the second presidential debate took U.S. politics to new lows with Hillary Clinton bashing Donald Trump over his abuse of women and bigotry toward others while Trump vowed to put her in jail, says Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

As senior members of his own Republican Party were deserting him, Donald Trump found his footing in his rematch debate with Hillary Clinton on Sunday night, blasting her for "always" blaming Russia even without evidence and for backing rebels who turn out "worse" than the leaders the U.S. seeks to overthrow. He even disavowed his own running mate for supporting war with Syria.

Just before the debate 16 Republican senators withdrew their support for Trump because of the emergence of a videotape on Friday in which Trump is heard making

obscene comments about how he treats women. The lewd remarks were all the U.S. corporate media could talk about and Trump was facing calls from within his party to step down.

Instead, he stepped up, literally. The town-hall-style debate at a Missouri university allowed Trump to move aggressively around the stage as he hurled invectives at his opponent. Clinton, who was on the defensive most of the night, tried to counter-attack on taxes, Russia, Syria and the scandal of the day, Trump's treatment of women. But she seemed unnerved by Trump, expecting instead a defeated man who had performed so badly in the first debate after taking her bait, and who should now have been on the ropes.

Having nearly the entire political establishment against him – the Democrats, the media and even his own party – seems to invigorate the totally unorthodox Trump. He even felt confident enough to blithely disagree with his running mate, Gov. Mike Pence of Indiana, who – in the vice presidential debate last week – backed U.S. military attacks on the Syrian government and then launched the most virulent criticism of Russia by any candidate in this campaign. Trump said he simply didn't agree with his running mate, something probably never said before publicly by a modern presidential candidate.

"I don't like [Bashar al-] Assad at all but Assad is killing ISIS," Trump said, referring to the Syrian president and the Islamic State jihadists who have seized portions of Syria and Iraq. "Russia is killing ISIS. And Iran is killing ISIS. And those three have now lined up because of our weak foreign policy."

Trump said the priority should be defeating ISIS before talking about what to do regarding the Assad government. "I believe we have to get ISIS," he said. "We have to worry about ISIS before we can get too much more involved."

Going After Russia...Again

Meanwhile, Clinton went on the counterattack early and often against Russia, and by extension Trump. She blamed Russian "aggression" for "destroying" Aleppo, though only east Aleppo is under attack, neighborhoods controlled by Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate and its allies.

"There is a determined effort by the Russian air force to destroy Aleppo in order to eliminate the last of the Syrian rebels who are really holding out against the Assad regime," she said, not mentioning that the main group "really holding out" is the same one that brought down the World Trade Center on 9/11.

Through ignorance or disinformation, she said, "There are hundreds of thousands of people probably about 250,000 still left" in Aleppo under Russia's bombing. That's the high estimate of the population in east Aleppo occupied by the

extremists. There are 1.5 million Aleppans living in the rest of the city, loyal to the government, and whose water was shut off for a time by the extremists in the east.

Despite the key role of Al Qaeda in the Aleppo conflict, Clinton again called for arming rebels and setting up a safe zone inside Syria, and a no-fly zone above it, a move that America's top general, Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, [told](#) Congress two weeks ago would lead to war with Russia. Even Clinton acknowledged in a [leaked email](#) that a no-fly zone would "kill a lot of Syrians." But she's still for it.

"She talks in favor of the rebels," Trump shot back. "She doesn't even know who they are. Every time we take rebels, whether it's in Iraq or anywhere else, we're arming people, and you know what happens? They end up being worse than the people" the U.S. overthrows.

"Look what she did in Libya with Gaddafi. Gaddafi's out. It's a mess," he said. "The fact is almost everything she's done in foreign policy has been a mistake and it's been a disaster."

Clinton again extended her attack on Russia to Trump for supposedly supporting its president, Vladimir Putin. She said U.S. intelligence has concluded, without making the evidence public, that Russia had hacked into U.S. election and Democratic Party computers "to influence our election."

"And believe me, they're not doing it to get me elected, they're doing it to try to influence the election for Donald Trump," she charged. "Now, maybe because he has praised Putin, maybe because he says he agrees with a lot of what Putin wants to do, maybe because he wants to do business in Moscow, I don't know the reasons."

Or, maybe it's because Trump has called for dialogue with Moscow while Clinton threatens Russia, even likening Putin to "Hitler."

Trump denied he had any outstanding loans with Russia or any business interests there.

"She doesn't know if it's the Russians doing the hacking," Trump responded. "But they always blame Russia and the reason is because they think they're trying to tarnish me with Russia. I know about Russia but I know nothing about the inner workings of Russia."

And neither do the vast majority of the American public because the corporate media never tells them Russia's side of the story. If it had, the American people might understand that Russia has been playing defense and that America

has been on the offensive, such as in Ukraine after a U.S.-backed coup; in Poland and the Baltics after provocative NATO maneuvers; and in Syria after a U.S. and allied-backed campaign of foreign extremists trying to overthrow the secular Syrian government.

But Trump also steered away from a fully honest discussion about today's dangerous geopolitics by putting on a display of typical rightwing rhetoric. He again trashed the Iran nuclear deal, which has considerably reduced tension in the region and in which Russia played a significant role. He called it "the dumbest deal I've ever seen" but that remark was probably the dumbest thing that Trump said all night.

Trump also reaffirmed that he wants to increase military spending, though the U.S. already outspends the next ten countries combined. He embraced easy access to guns, called for massive tax cuts for the rich, advocated more deregulation (despite the role of lax banking regulations in the Wall Street crash of 2008), and would have denounced climate change (the second most urgent problem after possible war with Russia) as a hoax but the question never came up, to the shame of the moderators who chose the questions from voters and asked many of their own.

After starting on the defensive over his recently disclosed 2005 remarks about groping women, Trump went on the offensive over Clinton's email issue. He blasted away at Clinton for deleting 33,000 emails from her private server and for claiming not to know that many of the emails on her server were classified and vulnerable to hacking (though the FBI says it has no evidence that the server was successfully hacked).

In possibly the most stunning comment of the evening, Trump said that if he becomes president he would arrange a special prosecutor to investigate her use of the private email server although the FBI and the Justice Department have already declined to prosecute the case. At one point, he quipped that she would be "in jail" if he were president. That led the dour Dana Bash and other CNN talking heads to compare him to Hitler and Stalin, who didn't need prosecutors to send someone away.

Trump and Women

The debate's sordid tone began with a question about the videotape disclosed on Friday in which Trump makes several obscene remarks about women. He describes women letting him sexually touch them soon after meeting him because he is "a star." It was a hideously sexist remark about abuse of power.

In the debate, Trump expressed remorse for the comments but claimed he was just

engaging in “locker room talk” and didn’t do the lewd practices that he described. That would give Trump at age 59 at the time of the remarks the mentality of an immature 14-year old. Clinton and her supporters instead say he was talking about actual sexual assaults that he committed. You can be sure the Clinton camp is searching for the woman Trump took furniture shopping or any others who might have been groped.

Faced with this onslaught, Trump pulled the ace from his sleeve that he threatened to play in the first debate – and the second debate rapidly descended deep into the mud. Trump said Hillary Clinton had in the 1990s attacked women who had accused her husband Bill Clinton of sexually assaulting them. Trump invited three of these women to the debate and held a press conference with them before it began.

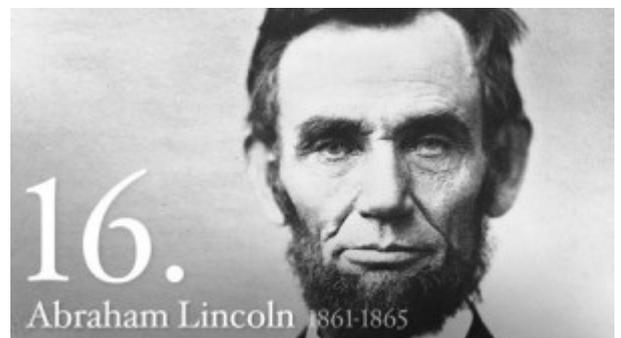
Dismissing the importance of the videotape, Trump said it was more important to talk about defeating ISIS and Clinton’s disastrous and violent record as secretary of state. Clinton ignored his remark about her attacking her husband’s accusers. Instead she said the tape showed the world the real Donald Trump.

“He has said that the video doesn’t represent who he is,” Clinton said. “But I think it’s clear to anyone who heard it that it represents exactly what he is.”

But Trump went after Clinton’s character too for calling half his supporters “deplorables” and some of them “irredeemable” in a fundraising speech, while claiming during the debate that she wants to be president for all Americans.

You’re No Abe Lincoln

Trump then blasted comments she made to Wall Street bankers and other special interests in speeches over the past four years, transcripts that she has refused to make public. But largely buried by the video hysteria over the past several days were portions of the speeches made public by Wikileaks, also on Friday, in which she cozied up to the well-to-do.



According to one excerpt, Clinton advocated politicians taking one position in public and another one in private, prompting one undecided voter at the debate to ask: “Is it okay for politicians to be two-faced? Is it acceptable for a

politician to have a private stance?" In response, Clinton said the context of her remark was Abraham Lincoln, as portrayed in the movie "Lincoln," altering his positions depending on his audience as he negotiated to amend the Constitution to formally outlaw slavery.

"She lied," Trump responded. "Now she's blaming the lie on the late great Abraham Lincoln. ... Honest Abe never lied. ... That's the big difference between Abraham Lincoln and you."

The post-debate discussion on U.S. cable networks did little to redeem the evening. The commentary was pathetic, obsessing over Trump's videotape and ignoring Clinton's record on Libya and Syria, including her dangerous threats against Russia. There was also no discussion about Trump's desire to jack up military spending.

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Are Humans Natural-Born Killers?

Among scientists there has been a long debate about whether human violence toward other humans is inherent, cultural or a mix of both. The question is: Are we natural-born killers, notes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

A new study, published in the journal *Nature* and entitled "The Phylogenetic Roots of Human Lethal Violence," argues two points: (1) along with many other mammals and particularly primates, human lethal violence is innate because it is part of a long "evolutionary history"; and (2) for humans, however, it is also a behavior that is responsive to our cultural environment. So, over time, "culture modulates our bloodthirsty tendencies."

What is particularly original about this study is that it places human violence against the backdrop of general mammalian and primate lethal behavior. The researchers found that there is a correlation between the level of intra-group violence of those species that lie close to each other on the evolutionary tree.

In order to come to this conclusion the authors of the study (who are evolutionary biologists) looked at the available data on in-group violent deaths in 1,020 mammal species. From this information they tried to approximate how murderous each group is. For conclusions about the human propensity for murder, the researchers looked at 600 human groups stretching back as far as 50,000 years ago. It turns out we are less violent than baboons and more violent than bonobos, while about as violent as chimpanzees.

Just for the reader's information, it seems that killer whales almost never hurt each other, and bats and anteaters are quite peaceable to others of their kind. On the other hand, if you're a cougar, chinchilla or marmot, things can get very dangerous and one has to stay wary of the neighbors.

Getting back to humans, almost every serious historian knows that our propensity for lethal violence has been around for as far back as we can go. Thus the proposition that this behavior is inherited from our pre-human ancestors seems reasonable. However, there is an effort on the part of some researchers in this field, including those who wrote the *Nature* article, to make the argument that humans are getting less violent.

For instance, this study claims that among Paleolithic hunter-gather groups, roughly 2 percent of deaths were the result of lethal violence. Later, in medieval times, this allegedly jumps to 12 percent. But in the modern age, with "industrialized states exerting the rule of law," the rate appears to have fallen to 1.3 percent. Is all of this really accurate?

The authors are not the first to make this claim. The Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker, in a 2011 book entitled *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, argues that humans can and have lowered their level of interpersonal violence through creating institutions and laws that discourage such behavior.

As a general rule we should be wary of such sweeping claims about behavior over such large expanses of time. As one observer of the *Nature* study commented, much of the data [sources range from archeological digs to modern crime statistics] is "imprecise." The same is true of Pinker's evidence. It is due to just such challenges that such studies present these claims in terms of statistical models.

Evolution and Culture

There is much more that can be said about what may well be our species' "innate tendency to solve problems with violence." For one thing, it often appears to be territorial. Human beings, nomadic or otherwise, stake out territory and then defend it. This is obviously similar to what certain other primates, close to us

on the evolutionary tree, do and so it is reasonable to assume an evolutionary derivation for this behavior.

As societies developed – got larger and more complex – efforts arose to control destructive behavior within in-groups. These took the form of the laws referred to by Steven Pinker as well as the present authors. However, sometimes the data seems to belie this claim.

For instance, why should the medieval period be so much more violent than the Paleolithic if societal institutions and laws were so much more developed at that later time? There might be extenuating circumstances to explain this, but the glitch does suggest that an overall answer to why the rates of lethal human violence go up and down is complicated and multifaceted.

And, what can we say of the modern era, which is supposed to be humankind's least murderous epoch? If the statistics are correct – which seems counterintuitive – we should be reassured. However, less reassuring is the fact that our technological know-how has also supplied modern mankind with nuclear weapons and thus the ability to wipe out our species, and most all the others too.

There may be a glimmer of hope for a more peaceful future if indeed our violent inclinations are tied to acquisition of territory, and within those territories we usually make efforts to minimize intra-group violence. Under those circumstances one can speculate that the development of ever larger states (culminating in a world state) with ever larger in-groups (culminating in humanity as a single in-group) seems the way to go. Then, in theory, law and order within these expanding categories would make for a more peaceful world.

Just to interpose this part of the analysis into today's U.S. politics, we can note that the Republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump, wants to make the country's collective in-group smaller by deporting hundreds of thousands and closing the borders to thousands more. Such a policy can only make the United States more insular and subject to the paranoia of a heightened us-versus-them worldview.

On the other hand, the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, seems to be advocating a hawkish foreign policy that emphasizes the need to control foreign territory directly or by proxy but with no inclination to increase the in-group. This too can only make the world a more dangerous place. The view of one candidate or the other being a "lesser evil" might depend on whether you are focused on domestic or foreign policy.

Whatever the optimistic claim of the *Nature* study about today's comparative

level of lethal violence, it seems pretty clear that our laws are not doing well enough to supply the peaceful future most of us hope for. For instance, international human rights laws are so infrequently enforced as to be of minimal effect. And, as current migrant crises around the world make clear, the prospects for ever larger in-groups are but a dream.

All of this only gives added credence to the notion that our willingness to slaughter each other is innate – an adaptive habit of a long evolutionary history. This conclusion is offered as an explanation rather than an excuse. For, as the *Nature* study authors recognize, culture can impact such behavior – tamping it down at least within a designated in-group.

Yet it is hard to shake the feeling that our addiction to lethal violence is our evolutionary fate, and that it hangs there, like a sword of Damocles, always ready to impose itself should the delicate strand of law snap.

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