

# US House Seeks Syria-War Escalation

Moving to trap President-elect Trump into a war escalation in Syria, the House rushed through a resolution promoting a U.S.-imposed “no fly zone” that could spark World War III, reports Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

Late in the day, on Nov. 15, one week after the U.S. elections, the lame-duck Congress convened in special session with normal rules suspended so the House could pass House Resolution 5732, the “Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act” calling for intensifying the already harsh sanctions on Syria, assessing the imposition of a “no fly zone” inside Syria (to prevent the Syrian government from flying) and escalating efforts to press criminal charges against Syrian officials.

HR5732 claims to promote a negotiated settlement in Syria but, as analyzed by Friends Committee for National Legislation, it imposes preconditions which would actually make a peace agreement more difficult.

There was 40 minutes of “debate” with six representatives (Ed Royce, R-California; Eliot Engel, D-New York; Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-Florida; Dan Kildee, D-Michigan; Chris Smith, R-New Jersey; and Carlos Curbelo, R-Florida) all speaking in favor of the resolution. There were few other representatives present, but the House Foreign Affairs Committee stated that the resolution was passed “unanimously” without mentioning these special conditions.

According to Wikipedia, “Suspension of the rules is a procedure generally used to quickly pass non-controversial bills in the United States House of Representatives ... such as naming Post Offices...” In this case, however, the resolution could lead to a wider war in the Middle East and potentially World War III with nuclear-armed Russia.

Most strikingly, the resolution calls for evaluating and developing plans for the United States to impose a “no fly zone” inside Syria, a sovereign nation, an act of war that also would violate international law as an act of aggression. It also could put the U.S. military in the position of shooting down Russian aircraft.

To call this proposal “non-controversial” is absurd, although it may say a great deal about the “group think” of the U.S. Congress that an act of war would be so casually considered. Clearly, this resolution should have been debated under normal rules with a reasonable amount of Congressional presence and debate.

The motivation for bypassing normal rules and rushing the bill through without meaningful debate was articulated by the bill's sponsor, Democrat Eliot Engel: "We cannot delay action on Syria any further. ... If we don't get this legislation across the finish line in the next few weeks, we are back to square one."

The current urgency may be related to the election results since President-elect Donald Trump has spoken out against "regime change" foreign policy. As much as neoconservatives and their liberal-interventionist allies are critical of President Obama for not doing more in Syria, these Congressional hawks are even more concerned about the prospect of a President who might move toward peace and away from war.

### **The Caesar Fraud**

HR5732 is titled the "Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act," which House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Royce explained was named after "the brave Syrian defector known to the world as Caesar, who testified to us the shocking scale of torture being carried out within the prisons of Syria."

In reality, the Caesar story was a grand deception involving the CIA with funding from Qatar to sabotage the 2014 Geneva peace negotiations. The 55,000 photos which were said to show 11,000 torture victims have never been publicly revealed. Only a tiny number of photos have been publicized. However, in 2015, Human Rights Watch was granted access to view the entire set. They revealed that almost one half the photos show the opposite of what was claimed: instead of victims tortured by the Syrian government, they actually show dead Syrian soldiers and civilian victims of car bombs and other terror attacks. The "Caesar" story, replete with a masked "defector," was one of the early propaganda hoaxes regarding Syria.

One of the other big lies regarding Syria is that the U.S. has been doing nothing. Royce said, "The administration has decided not to decide. And that itself, unfortunately, has set a course where here we sit and watch and the violence only worsens. Mr. Speaker, America has been sitting back and watching these atrocities for far too long. Vital U.S. national security interests are at stake."

Rep. Engel said, "Four years ago I thought we should have aided the Free Syrian Army. They came to us in Washington and begged us for help. ... They were simply looking for weaponry. I really believe if we had given it to them, the situation in Syria would have been different today."

That narrative is nonsense. By late 2011, the U.S. was actively coordinating, training and supplying armed opposition groups. When Muammar Gaddafi's Libyan

government was toppled in fall 2011, the CIA oversaw the diversion of Libyan weapons to the Syrian armed opposition, as documented in the Defense Intelligence Agency report of October 2012.

These weapons transfers were secret. For the public record, it was acknowledged that the U.S. was supplying communications equipment to the armed opposition while U.S. "allies" – Saudi Arabia and Qatar – were supplying the weaponry. This is one reason that Saudi purchases of weapons skyrocketed during this time period; they were buying weapons to replace those being shipped to the armed opposition in Syria. It was very profitable for U.S. arms manufacturers.

Huge weapons transfers to the armed opposition in Syria have continued to the present, with the U.S. government even more directly involved. This past spring, Janes Defense reported the details of a U.S. delivery of 2.2 million pounds of ammunition, rocket launchers and other weaponry to the armed opposition.

So, the political claims that the U.S. has been inactive are baseless. In reality, the U.S. has done everything short of a direct attack on Syria. And the U.S. military is starting to cross that line. On Sept. 17, the U.S. air coalition conducted a series of airstrikes on the Syrian Army in Deir Ezzor, killing 80 Syrian soldiers and enabling ISIS to launch an attack on the position. Claims that it was a "mistake" are highly dubious.

The assertions by Congressional hawks that the U.S. has been "inactive" in the Syrian conflict are part of the false narrative suggesting the U.S. must "do something" which leads to a "no fly zone" and full-scale war. Ironically, these calls for war are masked as "humanitarian" though even proponents, such as Hillary Clinton, privately have acknowledged that large numbers of Syrians, including civilians, would be killed in the U.S. attacks needed to establish the "no fly zone."

And, never do the proponents bring up the case of Libya where the U.S. and NATO "did something": destroyed the government and created chaos.

### **Fact-Free House of Propaganda**

With only a handful of representatives present and no dissent, the six Congressional members engaged in unrestrained propaganda and misinformation.

Engel, said "We're going into the New Year 2017, Assad still clings to power, at the expense of killing millions of his citizens." Even if all the deaths, including Syrian soldiers and civilians killed by anti-government jihadists, were blamed on Assad, this number is way off anyone's charts.

Rep. Kildee said "The world has witnessed this terrible tragedy unfold before

our eyes. Nearly half a million Syrians killed. Not soldiers – men, women, children killed.”

The official text of the resolution says, “It is the sense of Congress that– (1) Bashar al-Assad’s murderous actions against the people of Syria have caused the deaths of more than 400,000 civilians...”

The above accusations – from “millions of citizens” to “half a million” to “400,000 civilians” – are all preposterous lies. Credible estimates of casualties in the Syrian conflict range from 300,000 to 420,000. The opposition-supporting Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimates the documented 2011-2016 death toll as follows: killed pro-Syrian forces – 108,000; killed anti-government forces – 105,000; killed civilians – 89,000

In contrast with Congressional and media claims, civilians comprise a minority of the total death count and the heaviest casualties are among those fighting in defense of the Syrian state. In the U.S. political world and the mainstream media, these facts are ignored and never mentioned because they point to the reality versus the propaganda narrative which has allowed the U.S. and its allies to continue funding terrorism and a war of aggression against Syria.

The Congressional speakers were in full self-righteous mode as they accused the Syrian government of “committing crimes against humanity and war crimes against civilians including murder, torture and rape. No one has been spared from this targeting, even children.” A naive listener would never know that the Syrian government is primarily fighting the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda including thousands of foreign fighters supplied and paid by foreign governments.

The speakers went on to accuse the Syrian military of “targeting” hospitals, schools and markets. A critical listener might ask why they would do that instead of targeting Al Qaeda terrorists and their allies who launch dozens and sometimes hundreds of hell-cannon missiles into the government-held sections of Aleppo every day.

The Congressional propaganda fest would not be complete without mention of the “White Helmets.” Royce said “We (previously) heard the testimony of Raed Saleh of the Syrian White Helmets. These are the doctors, nurses and volunteers who actually, when the bombs come, run towards the areas that have been hit in order to try to get the injured civilians medical treatment. ... They have lost over 600 doctors and nurses.”

This is more Congressional nonsense. There are no nurses or doctors associated with the White Helmets. The organization was created by the U.S. and U.K. and heavily promoted by a “shady PR firm.” The White Helmets operate solely in areas

controlled by Al Qaeda's Nusra Front (recently renamed Syria Conquest Front) and associated terrorist groups. The White Helmets do some rescue work in the conflict zone but their main role is in the information war manipulating public opinion.

The White Helmets actively promote U.S./NATO intervention through a "no fly zone." Recently, the White Helmets became a major source of claims about innocent civilian victims in east Aleppo.

Given the clear propagandistic history of the White Helmets, these claims should be treated with skepticism. We need to ask exactly what is the evidence?

The same skepticism needs to be applied to video and other reports from the Aleppo Media Center. AMC is a creation of the Syrian Expatriates Organization whose address on K Street in Washington, D.C., indicates it is a U.S. marketing operation.

### **What's Going On?**

The campaign to overthrow the Syrian government is failing and there is possibility of a victory for the Syrian government and its allies.

The earlier flood of international jihadi recruits is drying up. The Syrian Army and allies are gaining ground militarily and negotiating settlements or re-locations with "rebels" who previously terrorized Homs, Darraya (outer Damascus) and elsewhere. In Aleppo, the Syrian army and allies are tightening the noose around the armed opposition in east Aleppo.

This has caused alarm among neoconservative lawmakers devoted to Israel, Saudi Arabia and U.S. empire. They are desperate to prevent the Syrian government from finally eliminating the terrorist groups which the West and its allies have promoted for the past five-plus years.

"Pro Israel" groups have been major campaigners for passage of HR5732. The name of Simon Wiesenthal is even invoked in the resolution. Rabbi Lee Bycel wrote, "Where is the Conscience of the World?" as he questioned why the "humanitarian" HR5732 was not passed earlier.

Israeli interests are one of the primary forces sustaining and promoting the conflict. Syria is officially at war with Israel which continues to occupy the Syrian Golan Heights; Syria has been a key ally of the Lebanese Hezbollah resistance; and Syria has maintained its alliance with Iran. In 2010, Secretary of State Clinton urged Syria to break relations with Hezbollah, reduce relations with Iran and come to settlement with Israel. The Syrian refusal to comply with these Washington demands was instrumental in solidifying Washington's hostility.

Congressional proponents of HR5732 make clear the international dimension of the conflict. Royce explains, “It is Russia, it is Hezbollah, that are the primary movers of death and destruction. ... It is the IRGC [Revolutionary Guard] fighters from Iran.”

Engel echoes the same message: “Yes, we want to go after Assad’s partners in violence ... Iranian and Hezbollah forces.”

In words and deeds Israel has made its position on Syria crystal clear. Israeli Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren explained in an interview: “we always wanted [President] Bashar Assad to go, we always preferred the bad guys who weren’t backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran ... the greatest danger to Israel is by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran, to Damascus to Beirut. And we saw the Assad regime as the keystone in that arc.”

These statements have been fully backed up by Israeli actions bombing Syrian positions in southern Syria and providing medical treatment for Nusra/Al Qaeda and other armed opposition fighters.

### **What Will Happen Now?**

If the Syrian government and its allies continue to advance in Aleppo, Deir Ezzor, outer Damascus and the south, the situation will come to a head. The enemies of Syria – predominately the U.S., Gulf Countries, NATO and Israel – will come to a decision point. Do they intervene directly or do they allow their “regime change” project to collapse? HR5732 is an effort to prepare for direct intervention and aggression.

One thing is clear from the experience of Libya: Neoconservatives do not care if they leave a country in chaos. The main objective is to destabilize and overthrow a government which is too independent. If the U.S. and its allies cannot dominate the country, then at least they can destroy the contrary authority and leave chaos.

What is at stake in Syria is whether the U.S. and allies, including Israel and Saudi Arabia, are able to destroy the last secular and independent Arab country in the region and whether the U.S. goal of being the sole superpower in the world prevails. The rushed passage of HR5732 without any meaningful debate is indicative of that.

Despite Trump’s election and his stated priority of taking on Islamic terrorism – not overthrowing Assad – the “regime change” proponents have not given up their war on Syria. They still seek to escalate U.S. aggression there and hope to box President Trump in.

It's also clear that the U.S. Congress has become a venue where blatant lies can be stated with impunity and where violent actions are advanced behind a cynical and amoral veneer of "humanitarianism."

**Rick Sterling is an investigative journalist and member of Syria Solidarity Movement.**

---