

The War Against Alternative Information

The U.S. government is creating a new \$160 million bureaucracy to shut down information that doesn't conform to U.S. propaganda narratives, building on the strategy that sold the bloody Syrian "regime change" war, writes Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

The U.S. establishment is not content simply to have domination over the media narratives on critical foreign policy issues, such as Syria, Ukraine and Russia. It wants total domination. Thus we now have the "Countering Foreign Propaganda and Disinformation Act" that President Obama signed into law on Dec. 23 as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for 2017, setting aside \$160 million to combat any "propaganda" that challenges Official Washington's version of reality.

The new law mandates the U.S. Secretary of State to collaborate with the Secretary of Defense, Director of National Intelligence and other federal agencies to create a Global Engagement Center "to lead, synchronize, and coordinate efforts of the Federal Government to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining United States national security interests." The law directs the Center to be formed in 180 days and to share expertise among agencies and to "coordinate with allied nations."

The legislation was initiated in March 2016, as the demonization of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russia was already underway and was enacted amid the allegations of "Russian hacking" around the U.S. presidential election and the mainstream media's furor over supposedly "fake news." Defeated Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton voiced strong support for the bill: "It's imperative that leaders in both the private sector and the public sector step up to protect our democracy, and innocent lives."

The new law is remarkable for a number of reasons, not the least because it merges a new McCarthyism about purported dissemination of Russian "propaganda" on the Internet with a new Orwellianism by creating a kind of Ministry of Truth – or Global Engagement Center – to protect the American people from "foreign propaganda and disinformation."

As part of the effort to detect and defeat these unwanted narratives, the law authorizes the Center to: "Facilitate the use of a wide range of technologies and techniques by sharing expertise among Federal departments and agencies, seeking expertise from external sources, and implementing best practices." (This

section is an apparent reference to proposals that Google, Facebook and other technology companies find ways to block or brand certain Internet sites as purveyors of “Russian propaganda” or “fake news.”)

Justifying this new bureaucracy, the bill’s sponsors argued that the existing agencies for “strategic communications” and “public diplomacy” were not enough, that the information threat required “a whole-of-government approach leveraging all elements of national power.”

The law also is rife with irony since the U.S. government and related agencies are among the world’s biggest purveyors of propaganda and disinformation – or what you might call evidence-free claims, such as the recent accusations of Russia hacking into Democratic emails to “influence” the U.S. election.

Despite these accusations – leaked by the Obama administration and embraced as true by the mainstream U.S. news media – there is little or no public evidence to support the charges. There is also a contradictory analysis by veteran U.S. intelligence professionals as well as statements by Wikileaks founder Julian Assange and an associate, former British Ambassador Craig Murray, that the Russians were not the source of the leaks. Yet, the mainstream U.S. media has virtually ignored this counter-evidence, appearing eager to collaborate with the new “Global Engagement Center” even before it is officially formed.

Of course, there is a long history of U.S. disinformation and propaganda. Former CIA agents Philip Agee and John Stockwell documented how it was done decades ago, secretly planting “black propaganda” and covertly funding media outlets to influence events around the world, with much of the fake news blowing back into the American media.

In more recent decades, the U.S. government has adopted an Internet-era version of that formula with an emphasis on having the State Department or the U.S.-funded National Endowment for Democracy supply, train and pay “activists” and “citizen journalists” to create and distribute propaganda and false stories via “social media” and via contacts with the mainstream media. The U.S. government’s strategy also seeks to undermine and discredit journalists who challenge this orthodoxy. The new legislation escalates this information war by tossing another \$160 million into the pot.

Propaganda and Disinformation on Syria

Syria is a good case study in the modern application of information warfare. In her memoir *Hard Choices*, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote that the U.S. provided “support for (Syrian) civilian opposition groups, including satellite-linked computers, telephones, cameras, and training for more than a

thousand activists, students and independent journalists.”

Indeed, a huge amount of money has gone to “activists” and “civil society” groups in Syria and other countries that have been targeted for “regime change.” A lot of the money also goes to parent organizations that are based in the United States and Europe, so these efforts do not only support on-the-ground efforts to undermine the targeted countries, but perhaps even more importantly, the money influences and manipulates public opinion in the West.

In North America, representatives from the Syrian “Local Coordination Committees” (LCC) were frequent guests on popular media programs such as “DemocracyNow.” The message was clear: there is a “revolution” in Syria against a “brutal regime” personified in Bashar al-Assad. It was not mentioned that the “Local Coordination Committees” have been primarily funded by the West, specifically the Office for Syrian Opposition Support, which was founded by the U.S. State Department and the U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

More recently, news and analysis about Syria has been conveyed through the filter of the White Helmets, also known as Syrian Civil Defense. In the Western news media, the White Helmets are described as neutral, non-partisan, civilian volunteers courageously carrying out rescue work in the war zone. In fact, the group is none of the above. It was initiated by the U.S. and U.K. using a British military contractor and Brooklyn-based marketing company.

While they may have performed some genuine rescue operations, the White Helmets are primarily a media organization with a political goal: to promote NATO intervention in Syria. (The manipulation of public opinion using the White Helmets and promoted by the New York Times and Avaaz petition for a “No Fly Zone” in Syria is documented here.)

The White Helmets hoax continues to be widely believed and receives uncritical promotion though it has increasingly been exposed at alternative media outlets as the creation of a “shady PR firm.” During critical times in the conflict in Aleppo, White Helmet individuals have been used as the source for important news stories despite a track record of deception.

Recent Propaganda: Blatant Lies?

As the armed groups in east Aleppo recently lost ground and then collapsed, Western governments and allied media went into a frenzy of accusations against Syria and Russia based on reports from sources connected with the armed opposition. CNN host Wolf Blitzer described Aleppo as “falling” in a “slaughter of these women and children” while CNN host Jake Tapper referred to “genocide by another name.”

The Daily Beast published the claims of the Aleppo Siege Media Center under the title “Doomsday is held in Aleppo” and amid accusations that the Syrian army was executing civilians, burning them alive and “20 women committed suicide in order not to be raped.” These sensational claims were widely broadcast without verification. However, this “news” on CNN and throughout Western media came from highly biased sources and many of the claims – lacking anything approaching independent corroboration – could be accurately described as propaganda and disinformation.

Ironically, some of the supposedly “Russian propaganda” sites, such as RT, have provided first-hand on-the-ground reporting from the war zones with verifiable information that contradicts the Western narrative and thus has received almost no attention in the U.S. news media. For instance, some of these non-Western outlets have shown videos of popular celebrations over the “liberation of Aleppo.”

There has been further corroboration of these realities from peace activists, such as Jan Oberg of Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research who published a photo essay of his eyewitness observations in Aleppo including the happiness of civilians from east Aleppo reaching the government-controlled areas of west Aleppo, finally freed from areas that had been controlled by Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate and its jihadist allies in Ahrar al-Sham.

Dr. Nabil Antaki, a medical doctor from Aleppo, described the liberation of Aleppo in an interview titled “Aleppo is Celebrating, Free from Terrorists, the Western Media Misinformed.” The first Christmas celebrations in Aleppo in four years are shown here, replete with marching band members in Santa Claus outfits. Journalist Vanessa Beeley has published testimonies of civilians from east Aleppo. The happiness of civilians at their liberation is clear.

Whether or not you wish to accept these depictions of the reality in Aleppo, at a minimum, they reflect another side of the story that you have been denied while being persistently force-fed the version favored by the U.S. State Department. The goal of the new Global Engagement Center to counter “foreign propaganda” is to ensure that you never get to hear this alternative narrative to the Western propaganda line.

Even much earlier, contrary to the Western mythology of rebel “liberated zones,” there was strong evidence that the armed groups were never popular in Aleppo. American journalist James Foley described the situation in 2012 like this:

“Aleppo, a city of about 3 million people, was once the financial heart of Syria. As it continues to deteriorate, many civilians here are losing patience with the increasingly violent and unrecognizable opposition – one that is

hampered by infighting and a lack of structure, and deeply infiltrated by both foreign fighters and terrorist groups. The rebels in Aleppo are predominantly from the countryside, further alienating them from the urban crowd that once lived here peacefully, in relative economic comfort and with little interference from the authoritarian government of President Bashar al-Assad.”

On Nov. 22, 2012, Foley was kidnapped in northwestern Syria and held by Islamic State terrorists before his beheading in August 2014.

The Overall Narrative on Syria

Analysis of the Syrian conflict boils down to two competing narratives. One narrative is that the conflict is a fight for freedom and democracy against a brutal regime, a storyline promoted in the West and the Gulf states, which have been fueling the conflict from the start. This narrative is also favored by some self-styled “anti-imperialists” who want a “Syrian revolution.”

The other narrative is that the conflict is essentially a war of aggression against a sovereign state, with the aggressors including NATO countries, Gulf monarchies, Israel and Jordan. Domination of the Western media by these powerful interests is so thorough that one almost never gets access to this second narrative, which is essentially banned from not only the mainstream but also much of the liberal and progressive media.

For example, listeners and viewers of the generally progressive TV and radio program “DemocracyNow” have rarely if ever heard the second narrative described in any detail. Instead, the program frequently broadcasts the statements of Hillary Clinton, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power and others associated with the U.S. position. Rarely do you hear the viewpoint of the Syrian Ambassador to the United Nations, the Syrian Foreign Minister or analysts inside Syria and around the world who have written about and follow events there closely.

“DemocracyNow” also has done repeated interviews with proponents of the “Syrian revolution” while ignoring analysts who call the conflict a war of aggression sponsored by the West and the Gulf monarchies. This blackout of the second narrative continues despite the fact that many prominent international figures see it as such. For example, the former Foreign Minister of Nicaragua and former President of the UN General Assembly, Father Miguel D’Escoto, has said, “What the U.S. government is doing in Syria is tantamount to a war of aggression, which, according to the Nuremberg Tribunal, is the worst possible crime a State can commit against another State.”

In many areas of politics, “DemocracyNow” is excellent and challenges mainstream

media. However in this area, coverage of the Syrian conflict, the broadcast is biased, one-sided and echoes the news and analysis of mainstream Western corporate media, showing the extent of control over foreign policy news that already exists in the United States and Europe.

Suppressing and Censoring Challenges

Despite the widespread censorship of alternative analyses on Syria and other foreign hotspots that already exists in the West, the U.S. government's new "Global Engagement Center" will seek to ensure that the censorship is even more complete with its goal to "counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation." We can expect even more aggressive and better-financed assaults on the few voices daring to challenge the West's "group thinks" – smear campaigns that are already quite extensive.

In an article titled "Controlling the Narrative on Syria", Louis Allday describes the criticisms and attacks on journalists Rania Khalek and Max Blumenthal for straying from the "approved" Western narrative on Syria. Some of the bullying and abuse has come from precisely those people, such as Robin Yassin-Kassab, who have been frequent guests in liberal Western media.

Reporters who have returned from Syria with accounts that challenge the propaganda themes that have permeated the Western media also have come under attack. For instance, Canadian journalist Eva Bartlett recently returned to North America after being in Syria and Aleppo, conveying a very different image and critical of the West's biased media coverage. Bartlett appeared at a United Nations press conference and then did numerous interviews across the country during a speaking tour. During the course of her talks and presentation, Bartlett criticized the White Helmets and questioned whether it was true that Al Quds Hospital in opposition-held East Aleppo was attacked and destroyed as claimed.

Bartlett's recounting of this information made her a target of Snopes, which has been a mostly useful website exposing urban legends and false rumors but has come under criticism itself for some internal challenges and has been inconsistent in its investigations. In one report entitled "White Helmet Hearsay," Snopes' writer Bethania Palmer says claims the White Helmets are "linked to terrorists" is "unproven," but she overlooks numerous videos, photos, and other reports showing White Helmet members celebrating a Nusra/Al Qaeda battle victory, picking up the bodies of civilians executed by a Nusra executioner, and having a member who alternatively appears as a rebel/terrorist fighter with a weapon and later wearing a White Helmet uniform. The "fact check" barely scrapes the surface of public evidence.

The same writer did another shallow “investigation” titled “victim blaming” regarding Bartlett’s critique of White Helmet videos and what happened at the Al Quds Hospital in Aleppo. Bartlett suggests that some White Helmet videos may be fabricated and may feature the same child at different times, i.e., photographs that appear to show the same girl being rescued by White Helmet workers at different places and times. While it is uncertain whether this is the same girl, the similarity is clear.

The Snopes writer goes on to criticize Bartlett for her comments about the reported bombing of Al Quds Hospital in east Aleppo in April 2016. A statement at the website of Doctors Without Borders says the building was “destroyed and reduced to rubble,” but this was clearly false since photos show the building with unclear damage. Five months later, the September 2016 report by Doctors Without Borders says the top two floors of the building were destroyed and the ground floor Emergency Room damaged yet they re-opened in two weeks.

The many inconsistencies and contradictions in the statements of Doctors Without Borders resulted in an open letter to them. In their last report, Doctors Without Borders (known by its French initials, MSF) acknowledges that “MSF staff did not directly witness the attack and has not visited Al Quds Hospital since 2014.”

Bartlett referenced satellite images taken before and after the reported attack on the hospital. The images do not show severe damage and it is unclear whether or not there is any damage to the roof, the basis for Bartlett’s statement. In the past week, independent journalists have visited the scene of Al Quds Hospital and report that that the top floors of the building are still there and damage is unclear.

The Snopes’ investigation criticizing Bartlett was superficial and ignored the broader issues of accuracy and integrity in the Western media’s depiction of the Syrian conflict. Instead the article appeared to be an effort to discredit the eyewitness observations and analysis of a journalist who dared challenge the mainstream narrative.

U.S. propaganda and disinformation on Syria has been extremely effective in misleading much of the American population. Thus, most Americans are unaware how many billions of taxpayer dollars have been spent on yet another “regime change” project. The propaganda campaign – having learned from the successful demonizations of Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi and other targeted leaders – has been so masterful regarding Syria that many liberal and progressive news outlets were pulled in. It has been left to RT and some Internet outlets to challenge the U.S. government and the mainstream media.

But the U.S. government's near total control of the message doesn't appear to be enough. Apparently even a few voices of dissent are a few voices too many.

The enactment of HR5181, "Countering Foreign Propaganda and Disinformation," suggests that the ruling powers seek to escalate suppression of news and analyses that run counter to the official narrative. Backed by a new infusion of \$160 million, the plan is to further squelch skeptical voices with operation for "countering" and "refuting" what the U.S. government deems to be propaganda and disinformation.

As part of the \$160 million package, funds can be used to hire or reward "civil society groups, media content providers, nongovernmental organizations, federally funded research and development centers, private companies, or academic institutions."

Among the tasks that these private entities can be hired to perform is to identify and investigate both print and online sources of news that are deemed to be distributing "disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda directed at the United States and its allies and partners."

In other words, we are about to see an escalation of the information war.

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