

Giuliani Says Assange Should Not Be Prosecuted

Donald Trump's lawyer said on Monday that WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange should not be prosecuted and he compared WikiLeaks publications to the Pentagon Papers.

By Joe Lauria

Special to Consortium News

Rudy Giuliani, a lawyer for President Donald Trump, said Monday that WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange had not done "anything wrong" and should not go to jail for disseminating stolen information just as major media does.

"Let's take the Pentagon Papers," Giuliani told Fox News. "The Pentagon Papers were stolen property, weren't they? It was in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Nobody went to jail at *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*."

Giuliani said there were "revelations during the Bush administration" such as Abu Ghraib. "All of that is stolen property taken from the government, it's against the law. But once it gets to a media publication, they can publish it," Giuliani said, "for the purpose of informing people."

"You can't put Assange in a different position," he said. "He was a guy who communicated."

Giuliani said, "We may not like what [Assange] communicates, but he was a media facility. He was putting that information out," he said. "Every newspaper and station grabbed it, and published it."

The U.S. government has admitted that it has indicted

Assange for publishing classified information, but it is battling in court to keep the details of the indictment secret. As a lawyer and close advisor to Trump, Giuliani could have influence on the president's and the Justice Department's thinking on Assange.

Giuliani also said there was no coordination between the Trump campaign and WikiLeaks. "I was with Donald Trump day in and day out during the last four months of the campaign," he said. "He was as surprised as I was about the WikiLeaks disclosures. Sometimes surprised to the extent of 'Oh my god, did they really say that?' We were wondering if it was true. They [the Clinton campaign] never denied it."

Giuliani said: "The thing that really got Hillary is not so much that it was revealed, but they were true. They actually had people as bad as that and she really was cheating on the debates. She really was getting from Donna Brazile the questions before hand. She really did completely screw Bernie Sanders."

"Every bit of that was true," he went on. "Just like the Pentagon Papers put a different view on Vietnam, this put a different view on Hillary Clinton."

Giuliani said, "It was not right to hack. People who did it should go to jail, but no press person or person disseminating that for the purpose of informing did anything wrong."

Assange has been holed up as a refugee in the Ecuador embassy in London for the past six years fearing that if he were to leave British authorities would arrest him and extradite him to the U.S. for prosecution.

You can watch the entire Fox News interview with Giuliani here:

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Wall Street, Banks and Angry Citizens

The post-Great Recession economic “recovery” was largely reserved for participants in financial markets, not the majority working longer hours and multiple jobs, writes Nomi Prins.

Inequality Worsens Around the Planet

By Nomi Prins

TomDispatch.com



As we head into 2019, a major question remains about the state of Main Street, not just in the U.S. but across the planet. If the global economy really is booming, as many politicians claim, why are leaders and their parties around the world continuing to get booted out of office in such a sweeping fashion?

One obvious answer: the post-Great Recession economic “recovery” was largely reserved for the few who could participate in the rising financial markets of those years, not the majority who continued to work longer hours, sometimes at multiple jobs, to stay afloat. In other words,

the good times have left out so many people, like those struggling to keep even a few hundred dollars in their bank accounts to cover an emergency or the 80 percent of U.S. workers who live paycheck to paycheck.

In today's global economy, financial security is increasingly the property of the 1 percent. No surprise, then, that, as a sense of economic instability continued to grow over the past decade, angst turned to anger, a transition that—from the U.S. to the Philippines, Hungary to Brazil, Poland to Mexico—has provoked a plethora of voter upheavals. In the process, a 1930s-style brew of rising nationalism and blaming the “other” – whether that other was an immigrant, a religious group, a country, or the rest of the world—emerged.

This phenomenon offered a series of Trumpian figures, including of course The Donald himself, an opening to ride a wave of “populism” to the heights of the political system. That the backgrounds and records of none of them—whether you're talking about Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Rodrigo Duterte, or Jair Bolsonaro (among others)—reflected the daily concerns of the “common people,” as the classic definition of populism might have it, hardly mattered. Even a billionaire could, it turned out, exploit economic insecurity effectively and use it to rise to ultimate power.

Ironically, as that American master at evoking the fears of apprentices everywhere showed, to assume the highest office in the land was only to begin a process of creating yet more fear and insecurity. Trump's trade wars, for instance, have typically infused the world with increased anxiety and distrust toward the U.S., even as they thwarted the ability

of domestic business leaders and ordinary people to plan for the future. Meanwhile, just under the surface of the reputed good times, the damage to that future only intensified. In other words, the groundwork has already been laid for what could be a frightening transformation, both domestically and globally.

That Old Financial Crisis

To understand how we got here, let's take a step back. Only a decade ago, the world experienced a genuine global financial crisis, a meltdown of the first order. Economic growth ended; shrinking economies threatened to collapse; countless jobs were cut; homes were foreclosed upon and lives wrecked. For regular people, access to credit suddenly disappeared. No wonder fears rose. No wonder for so many a brighter tomorrow ceased to exist.

The details of just why the Great Recession happened have since been glossed over by time and partisan spin. This September, when the 10th anniversary of the collapse of the global financial services firm Lehman Brothers came around, major business news channels considered whether the world might be at risk of another such crisis. However, coverage of such fears, like so many other topics, was quickly tossed aside in favor of paying yet more attention to Donald Trump's latest tweets, complaints, insults, and lies. Why? Because such a crisis was so 2008 in a year in which, it was claimed, we were enjoying a first class economic high and edging toward the longest bull-market in Wall Street history. When it came to "boom versus gloom," boom won hands down.

None of that changed one thing, though: most people still feel left behind both in the U.S. and globally. Thanks to the massive accumulation of wealth by a 1 percent skilled at gaming the system, the roots of a crisis that didn't end with the end of the Great Recession have spread across the planet, while the dividing line between the "have-nots" and the "have-a-lots" only sharpened and widened.

Though the media hasn't been paying much attention to the resulting inequality, the statistics (when you see them) on that ever-widening wealth gap are mind-boggling. According to Inequality.org, for instance, those with at least \$30 million in wealth globally had the fastest growth rate of any group between 2016 and 2017. The size of that club rose by more than 25 percent during those years, to 174,800 members. Or if you really want to grasp what's been happening, consider that, between 2009 and 2017, the number of billionaires whose combined wealth was greater than that of the world's poorest 50 percent fell from 380 to just eight. And by the way, despite claims by the president that every other country is screwing America, the U.S. leads the pack when it comes to the growth of inequality. As Inequality.org notes, it has "much greater shares of national wealth and income going to the richest 1 percent than any other country."

That, in part, is due to an institution many in the U.S. normally pay little attention to: the U.S. central bank, the Federal Reserve. It helped spark that increase in wealth disparity domestically and globally by adopting a post-crisis monetary policy in which electronically fabricated money (via a program called quantitative easing) was offered

to banks and corporations at significantly cheaper rates than to ordinary Americans.

Pumped into financial markets, that money sent stock prices soaring, which naturally ballooned the wealth of the small percentage of the population that actually owned stocks. According to economist Stephen Roach, considering the Fed's Survey of Consumer Finances, "It is hardly a stretch to conclude that [quantitative easing] exacerbated America's already severe income disparities."

Wall Street, Central Banks, and Everyday People

What has since taken place around the world seems right out of the 1930s. At that time, as the world was emerging from the Great Depression, a sense of broad economic security was slow to return. Instead, fascism and other forms of nationalism gained steam as people turned on the usual cast of politicians, on other countries, and on each other. (If that sounds faintly Trumpian to you, it should.)

In our post-2008 era, people have witnessed trillions of dollars flowing into bank bailouts and other financial subsidies, not just from governments but from the world's major central banks. Theoretically, private banks, as a result, would have more money and pay less interest to get it. They would then lend that money to Main Street. Businesses, big and small, would tap into those funds and, in turn, produce real economic growth through expansion, hiring sprees, and wage increases. People would then have more dollars in their pockets and, feeling more financially secure, would spend that money driving the economy to new heights—and all, of course, would then be well.

That fairy tale was pitched around the globe. In fact, cheap money also pushed debt to epic levels, while the share prices of banks rose, as did those of all sorts of other firms, to record-shattering heights.

Even in the U.S., however, where a magnificent recovery was supposed to have been in place for years, actual economic growth simply didn't materialize at the levels promised. At 2 percent per year, the average growth of the American gross domestic product over the past decade, for instance, has been half the average of 4 percent before the 2008 crisis. Similar numbers were repeated throughout the developed world and most emerging markets. In the meantime, total global debt hit \$247 trillion in the first quarter of 2018. As the Institute of International Finance found, countries were, on average, borrowing about three dollars for every dollar of goods or services created.

Global Consequences

What the Fed (along with central banks from Europe to Japan) ignited, in fact, was a disproportionate rise in the stock and bond markets with the money they created. That capital sought higher and faster returns than could be achieved in crucial infrastructure or social strengthening projects like building roads, high-speed railways, hospitals, or schools.

What followed was anything but fair. As former Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen noted four years ago, "It is no secret that the past few decades of widening inequality can be summed up as significant income and wealth gains for those at the very top and stagnant living standards for the majority." And, of course, continuing to pour money into the

highest levels of the private banking system was anything but a formula for walking that back.

Instead, as more citizens fell behind, a sense of disenfranchisement and bitterness with existing governments only grew. In the U.S., that meant Donald Trump. In the United Kingdom, similar discontent was reflected in the June 2016 Brexit vote to leave the European Union, which those who felt economically squeezed to death clearly meant as a slap at both the establishment domestically and EU leaders abroad.

Since then, multiple governments in the European Union, too, have shifted toward the populist right. In Germany, recent elections swung both right and left just six years after, in July 2012, European Central Bank head Mario Draghi exuded optimism over the ability of such banks to protect the financial system, the Euro, and generally hold things together.

Like the Fed in the U.S., the ECB went on to manufacture money, adding another \$3 trillion to its books that would be deployed to buy bonds from favored countries and companies. That artificial stimulus, too, only increased inequality within and between countries in Europe. Meanwhile, Brexit negotiations remain ruinously divisive, threatening to rip Great Britain apart.

Nor was such a story the captive of the North Atlantic. In Brazil, where left-wing president Dilma Rouseff was ousted from power in 2016, her successor Michel Temer oversaw plummeting economic growth and escalating unemployment. That, in turn, led to the election of that country's own

Donald Trump, nationalistic far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro who won a striking 55.2 percent of the vote against a backdrop of popular discontent. In true Trumpian style, he is disposed against both the very idea of climate change and multilateral trade agreements.

In Mexico, dissatisfied voters similarly rejected the political known, but by swinging left for the first time in 70 years. New president Andrés Manuel López Obrador, popularly known by his initials AMLO, promised to put the needs of ordinary Mexicans first. However, he has the U.S.—and the whims of Donald Trump and his “great wall” —to contend with, which could hamper those efforts.

As AMLO took office on Dec. 1, the G20 summit of world leaders was unfolding in Argentina. There, amid a glittering backdrop of power and influence, the trade war between the U.S. and the world’s rising superpower, China, came even more clearly into focus. While its president, Xi Jinping, having fully consolidated power amid a wave of Chinese nationalism, could become his country’s longest serving leader, he faces an international landscape that would have amazed and befuddled Mao Zedong.

Though Trump declared his meeting with Xi a success because the two sides agreed on a 90-day tariff truce, his prompt appointment of an anti-Chinese hardliner, Robert Lighthizer, to head negotiations, a tweet in which he referred to himself in superhero fashion as a “Tariff Man,” and news that the U.S. had requested that Canada arrest and extradite an executive of a key Chinese tech company, caused the Dow to take its fourth largest plunge in history and then fluctuate wildly as economic fears of a future “Great

Something” rose. More uncertainty and distrust were the true product of that meeting.

In fact, we are now in a world whose key leaders, especially the president of the United States, remain willfully oblivious to its long-term problems, putting policies like deregulation, fake nationalist solutions, and profits for the already grotesquely wealthy ahead of the future lives of the mass of citizens. Consider the yellow-vest protests that have broken out in France, where protestors identifying with left and right political parties are calling for the resignation of neoliberal French President Emmanuel Macron. Many of them, from financially starved provincial towns, are angry that their purchasing power has dropped so low they can barely make ends meet.

Ultimately, what transcends geography and geopolitics is an underlying level of economic discontent sparked by twenty-first-century economics and a resulting Grand Canyon-sized global inequality gap that is still widening. Whether the protests go left or right, what continues to lie at the heart of the matter is the way failed policies and stop-gap measures put in place around the world are no longer working, not when it comes to the non-1 percent anyway. People from Washington to Paris, London to Beijing, increasingly grasp that their economic circumstances are not getting better and are not likely to in any presently imaginable future, given those now in power.

A Dangerous Recipe

The financial crisis of 2008 initially fostered a policy of bailing out banks with cheap money that went not into Main

Street economies but into markets enriching the few. As a result, large numbers of people increasingly felt that they were being left behind and so turned against their leaders and sometimes each other as well.

This situation was then exploited by a set of self-appointed politicians of the people, including a billionaire TV personality who capitalized on an increasingly widespread fear of a future at risk. Their promises of economic prosperity were wrapped in populist platitudes, normally (but not always) of a right-wing sort. Lost in this shift away from previously dominant political parties and the systems that went with them was a true form of populism, which would genuinely put the needs of the majority of people over the elite few, build real things including infrastructure, foster organic wealth distribution, and stabilize economies above financial markets.

In the meantime, what we have is, of course, a recipe for an increasingly unstable and vicious world.

Nomi Prins is a [TomDispatch regular](#). Her latest book is ["Collusion: How Central Bankers Rigged the World"](#) (Nation Books). Of her six other books, the most recent is ["All the Presidents' Bankers: The Hidden Alliances That Drive American Power."](#) She is a former Wall Street executive. Special thanks go to researcher Craig Wilson for his superb work on this piece.

Local Forces Who Defeated ISIS in Syria Defend Their Territory

The outcry against Trump's decision to withdraw troops from Syria reveals an appetite for regional hegemony, writes As'ad AbuKhalil. It also minimizes the capacity of native militia to defend territory for which they fought and died.

A Wise and Rare Decision

By [As'ad AbuKhalil](#)

Special to Consortium News



President Donald Trump's announcement that he will withdraw 2000 U.S. troops from Syria has caused great alarm in elite circles. [The New York Times](#) and [The Washington Post](#) both warned it would leave Israel "abandoned" and "isolated" and would embolden enemies of the U.S. Martin Indyk, a former Mideast envoy for Democratic administrations, [complained](#) that Trump did not factor in the national security interests of Israel.

Hillary Clinton, the former secretary of state who lost the presidency to Trump, tweeted: "Actions have consequences, and whether we're in Syria or not, the people who want to harm us are there & at war. Isolationism is weakness. Empowering ISIS is dangerous. Playing into Russia & Iran's hands is foolish. This President is putting our national security at grave risk."

Hollywood celebrities have also [jumped into](#) the act.

The strong reaction to Trump's decision (which fulfills a

campaign promise to disengage militarily from the Middle East) highlights his gap with a mainstream media and foreign policy establishment that supports a more aggressive U.S. military intervention in the Middle East. The only time these detractors ever strongly supported Trump was when he ordered the bombing of Syria. Establishment spokesman Farid Zakaria, a favored CNN host and pundit, said Trump had finally become “presidential.” The only reservation was that the bombing should have been more massive.

The latest [civilian death toll in Syria](#) is over 107,000. The media has, by and large, disregarded the extent to which U.S. bombs have contributed to this enormous loss of life. When the history of the Syrian war is written, it is very likely that the destruction of Raqqa will be categorized as a U.S. war crime—to be added to the many war crimes committed by all sides in the protracted war.

Exaggerations of US Role

The outcry against Trump’s withdrawal announcement include exaggerations of the role that 2000 U.S. troops played in defeating ISIS (which exclude personnel involved in covert actions).

[In a Tweet](#), Rukmini Callimachi of *The New York Times* oddly attributed the loss of 99 percent of ISIS territory in Syria and Iraq to the work of the U.S.-led “coalition” (so broadly defined to include Sweden and Bahrain among others). This estimate typically ignores the contributions and sacrifices of native Syrian, Lebanese and Iraqi fighters, many of whom are foes of the U.S.

While it can’t be determined mathematically the extent to

which the U.S. and others contributed to the demise of ISIS, it is certain that the bulk of the fighting against ISIS—and the dying—was done by locals, the majority of whom opposed the U.S.

This was the case in Lebanon, where the fight against ISIS and al-Qaida, over the last two years, was carried out almost single-handedly by Hizbullah, which the U.S. State Department designates a terrorist organization. Similarly, Russia and its allies in Syria did most of the fighting against ISIS despite the contributions of pro-U.S. Kurdish militias and some rebel groups.

The economic power of ISIS—in terms of the oil trade—was largely destroyed by Russian, not U.S., bombing. In Iraq, the virtual collapse of the U.S.-trained Iraqi Army in June 2014, when Mosul was overrun, was a major factor in the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria and beyond.

In Iraq, the process of mobilization and recruitment against ISIS began with the formation of Hashd, or “mass,” militias formed at the behest of [Ayatollah Sistani](#), the senior Iranian Shia cleric based in Iraq. [Qasem Soleimani](#), commander of the [Quds Force](#) of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards became directly involved. While these natives fought back and destroyed ISIS in Iraq the U.S. provided air cover. Locals did the fighting and the dying.

Trump’s agenda poses a danger to the U.S. and the world. But the global agenda of the Democratic and Republican (establishment) is even more dangerous. It would expand wars in the Middle East and beyond. It would intensify U.S. enmities to places such as Russia, China, North Korea and

Iran and abort any attempts at reconciliation. It would prevent the U.S. from leaving a military occupation. It would challenge the enemies of the U.S. and Israel with direct U.S. military projection of force throughout the Middle East.

Presidents Obey the Military

Trump's fault, in the eyes of those who criticize his decision to withdraw troops from Syria, is that he did not follow the advice of his military. The notion that a president must follow military orders is entirely undemocratic. But since Sept. 11, 2001, it has been established—especially by Democrats—that the commander in chief should do just that. Thus, President Barack Obama went against his own views and agreed to expand the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan.

Due to its strong popular support, the U.S. military often operates outside the reach of congressional supervision or public accountability. By occasionally challenging the generals, as with this decision to withdraw troops from Syria and Afghanistan, Trump has proven more politically courageous than Obama, who was afraid to defy the brass. (While Obama resisted his own foreign policy advisors' pressures to intervene more deeply in Syria, the U.S. military at that time was less enthusiastic about intervention.)

Israel was clearly unhappy with Trump's announcement of troop withdrawal from Syria, although Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was one of the few world leaders briefed by Trump before announcing his decision. (Is there a matter

of any significance over which the U.S. president—whether Bush or Obama or Trump—does not brief Netanyahu?)

To satisfy Israel, the U.S. must deploy troops in all Arab countries and to join Israel in its unending wars against the whole Arab world. (Paradoxically, Israel is loathed by the Arab people while cruel Arab despots in the Gulf—such as those leading Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar—race to establish relations with Israel and often try to ingratiate themselves with the U.S. president and Congress.)

Israel, through its powerful lobby, has been agitating for the U.S. to wage war on Iran, Syria, Hizbullah and the Palestinian territories. And Western media—no matter how much Israel accumulates by way of its massive arsenal of WMDs, and no matter how much Israeli gives itself the right to bomb at will in Syria and Palestine—still treats Israel as a vulnerable entity in need of permanent U.S. military protection.

All of this explains why Clinton is more popular than Trump. She had promised more military hegemony in the Middle East. And she was just as enthusiastic as Trump about propping up Middle East despots. For instance, as secretary of state, Clinton supported Egyptian dictator Husni Mubarak at all costs. When Mubarak fell she wanted the head of the secret police, Omar Suleiman, to be his successor.

The underlying causes for U.S. withdrawals from Syria can't be known and some wager it won't pan out. But it is unlikely that it's part of a large geo-strategic scheme on Trump's part. Nor is the move likely to predict a U.S. strike on Iran. After two years in office, Trump is showing more self-

confidence in his foreign policy decisions than when he started. It is likely that he will follow his original isolationist instincts. Those instincts are at odds with the bipartisan consensus in D.C., which has heaped an avalanche of criticism upon one of the rare wise decisions of an often rash president.

ISIS is indeed on the run, and it has lost the bulk of its territorial base. It retains some fighters in its remnants in Eastern Syria, but its ability to expand is drastically limited. The major enemies of ISIS—those who drove ISIS from most of its territory—remain on the ground in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. While overlooked by Western reporters and columnists, they are ready to go to war again to fight back an ISIS offensive.

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Watch Replay of 10th Online Vigil for Julian Assange

Consortium News on Friday night broadcast live the 10th online vigil for WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange. Among the guests was Francis Boyle, a University of Illinois international law professor, who spoke about his experiences with the U.S.-British extradition treaty.

Other guests were radio host Scott Horton, activists Cathy Vogan and Vivian Kubrick, journalist Nozomi Hayase, priest and boxer Father Dave, radio journalist Ann Garrison, CIA analyst Ray McGovern and journalist and historian Gareth Porter. If you missed the live broadcast you can watch the entire replay here, which ends with a video of a talk given by Julian Assange:

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Critics of Syria Withdrawal Fueled Rise of ISIS

Too many of those protesting the removal of U.S. forces are

authors of the catastrophe that tore Syria to pieces, reports Max Blumenthal for **Consortium News**.

By Max Blumenthal

Special to Consortium News



President Donald Trump's announcement of an imminent withdrawal of US troops from northeastern Syria summoned a predictable paroxysm of outrage from Washington's foreign policy establishment. Former secretary of state and self-described "hair icon" Hillary Clinton perfectly distilled the bipartisan freakout into a single tweet, accusing Trump of "isolationism" and "playing into Russia and Iran's hands."

Michelle Flournoy, the DC apparatchik who would have been Hillary's secretary of defense, slammed the pull-out as "foreign policy malpractice," while Hillary's successor at the State Department, John Kerry, threw bits of red meat to the Russiagate-crazed Democratic base by branding Trump's decision "a Christmas gift to Putin." From the halls of Congress to the K Street corridors of Gulf-funded think tanks, a chorus of protest proclaimed that removing U.S. troops from Syria would simultaneously abet Iran and bring ISIS back from the grave.

Yet few of those thundering condemnations of the president's move seemed able to explain just why a few thousand U.S. troops had been deployed to the Syrian hinterlands in the first place. If the mission was to destroy ISIS, then why did ISIS rise in the first place? And why was the jihadist organization still festering right in the midst of the U.S.

military occupation?

Too many critics of withdrawal had played central roles in the Syrian crisis to answer these questions honestly. They had either served as media cheerleaders for intervention, or crafted the policies aimed at collapsing Syria's government that fueled the rise of ISIS. The Syrian catastrophe was their legacy, and they were out to defend it at any cost.

Birthing ISIS From the Womb of Regime Change

During the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, Clinton, Kerry, and the rest of the Beltway blob lined up reflexively behind George W. Bush. The insurgency that followed the violent removal of Iraq's Ba'athist government set the stage for the declaration of the first Islamic State by Abu Musab Zarqawi in 2006.

Five years later, with near-total consent from Congress, Hillary enthusiastically presided over NATO's assault on Libya, cackling with glee when she learned that the country's longtime leader, Moammar Gaddafi, had been sodomized with a bayonet and shot to death by Islamist insurgents – "We came, we saw, he died!" It was not long before an Islamist Emirate was established in Gaddafi's hometown of Sirte, while 31 flavors of jihadi militias festered in Tripoli and Benghazi.

While still defending her vote on Iraq, Hillary made the case for arming the anti-Assad opposition in Syria. "In a conflict like this," she said, "the hard men with the guns are going to be the more likely actors in any political transition than those on the outside just talking."

In 2012, the CIA initiated a one billion dollar arm-and-equip operation to fund the so-called “moderate rebels” united under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). [A classified Defense Intelligence Agency memo](#) distributed across Obama administration channels in August of that year warned that jihadist forces emanating from Iraq aimed to exploit the security vacuum opened up by the US-backed proxy war to establish a “Salafist principality in eastern Syria” – an “Islamic State,” in the exact words of the memo.

Referring to Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia’s Syrian affiliate by its name, Jabhat al-Nusra, before Western media ever had, the DIA emphasized the close ties the group had fostered with Syria’s “moderate rebels”: “AQI supported the Syrian opposition from the beginning, both ideologically and through the media. AQI declared its opposition to Assad’s regime from the beginning because it considered it a sectarian regime targeting Sunnis.”

The memo was authored under the watch of then-Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, who was convicted this year of failing to register as a foreign agent of Turkey – an extremely ironic development considering Turkey’s role in fueling the Syrian insurgency. Predictably, the document was ignored across the board by the Obama administration. Meanwhile, heavy weapons were flowing out of the U.S. Incirlik air base in Turkey and into the hands of anyone who could grab them across the Syrian border.

As early as February 2013, a United Nations independent inquiry report [concluded](#), “The FSA has remained a brand name only.” The UN further issued a damning assessment of the role of the United States, UK and their Gulf allies in

fueling extremism across Syria. "The intervention of external sponsors has contributed to the radicalization of the insurgency as it has favoured Salafi armed groups such as the al-Nusra Front, and even encouraged mainstream insurgents to join them owing to their superior logistical and operational capabilities," the report stated.

US Arms, ISIS Caliphate

How ISIS overran large swaths of territory in northeastern Syria and established its de facto capital Raqqa is scarcely understood, let alone discussed by Western media. That is partly because the real story is so inconvenient to the established narrative of the Syrian conflict, which blames Assad for every atrocity that has ever occurred in his country, and for some horrors that may not have ever taken place. Echoing the Bush administration's discredited attempts to link Saddam Hussein to Al Qaeda, some neoconservative pundits hatched a conspiracy theory that accused Assad of covertly orchestrating the rise of ISIS in order to curry support from the West. But the documented evidence firmly established the success of ISIS as a byproduct of the semi-covert American program to arm Assad's supposedly moderate opposition.

Back in March 2013, a coalition of Syrian rebel forces representing the CIA-backed FSA, the Turkish and Qatari proxy, Ahrar al-Sham, and the Al Qaeda affiliate, al-Nusra, overwhelmed the Syrian army in Raqqa. Opposition activists declared the city the "icon of the revolution" and celebrated in Raqqa's town center, waving the tricolor flags of the FSA alongside the black banners of ISIS and al-Nusra, which set up its headquarters in the city's town hall.

But disorder quickly spread throughout the city as its residents attempted to order their affairs through local councils. Meanwhile, the US-backed FSA had ceded the city to al-Nusra, taking the fight to the front lines against government forces further afield. The chaos stirred by the insurgents and their foreign backers had created the perfect petri dish for jihadism to fester.

A month after Raqqa was taken, the Iraqi zealot and ISIS commander Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi revealed that al-Nusra had been a Trojan horse for his organization, referring to its commander, Mohammed Jolani, as “our son.” Jolani, in turn, admitted that he had entered Syria from Iraq as a soldier of the Islamic State, [declaring](#), “We accompanied the jihad in Iraq as military escorts from its beginning until our return [to Syria] after the Syrian revolution.”

By August, Baghdadi completed his coup, announcing control over the city. According to the anti-Assad website, [Syria Untold](#), the U.S.-backed FSA had “balked in the face of ISIS and avoided any military confrontation with it.” Many of its fighters quickly jumped ship to either the Islamic State or al-Nusra.

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“The [FSA] battalions are scared to become the weakest link, that they will be swallowed by ISIS,” a media activist named Ahmed [al-Asmeh told the journalist Alison Meuse](#). “A number joined ISIS, and those who were with the people joined Jabhat al-Nusra.”

Backing “Territorial ISIS”

As the insurgency advanced towards Syria’s coast, leaving piles of corpses in its wake and propelling a refugee crisis of unprecedented proportions, the U.S. stepped up its arm-and-equip program. By 2015, the CIA was pouring anti-tank missiles into the ranks of Nourredine Al-Zinki, an extremist militia that eventually forged a coalition with bands of fanatics that made no attempt to disguise their ideology. Among the new opposition umbrella group was one outfit called, “The Bin Laden Front.”

Despite all its war on terror bluster, the U.S. was treating ISIS as an asset in its bid to topple Assad. Then Secretary of State Kerry copped to the strategy in a leaked private meeting with Syrian opposition activists in Sept. 2016: “We were watching,” Kerry revealed. “We saw that Daesh [ISIS] was growing in strength and we thought Assad was threatened. We thought, however, we could probably manage, you know, that Assad might negotiate and instead of negotiating, you got Assad, ah, you got Putin supporting him.”

When Russia directly intervened in Syria in 2015, the Obama administration’s most outspoken interventionists railed against its campaign to roll back the presence of Al Qaeda and its allies, comparing it to the Rwandan genocide. These same officials were curiously quiet, however, when Russia combined forces with the Syrian military to drive ISIS from the city of Palmyra, to save the home of the world’s most treasured antiquities from destruction.

At a March 24, 2016, press briefing, a reporter asked U.S. State Department spokesman Mark Toner, “Do you want to see

the [Syrian] regime retake Palmyra, or would you prefer that it stays in Daesh's [ISIS] hands?"

Toner strung together empty platitudes for a full minute.

"You're not answering my question," the reporter protested.

Toner emitted a nervous laugh and conceded, "I know I'm not."

About a year later, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman openly called for the U.S. to use ISIS as a strategic tool, reiterating the cynical logic for the strategy that was already in place. "We could simply back off fighting territorial ISIS in Syria and make it entirely a problem for Iran, Russia, Hezbollah and Assad," Friedman proposed. "After all, they're the ones overextended in Syria, not us. Make them fight a two-front war—the moderate rebels on one side and ISIS on the other."

Giving ISIS 'Breathing Space'



When the U.S. finally decided to make a move against ISIS in 2017, it was gripped with anxiety about the Syrian government restoring control over the oil-rich areas ISIS controlled across the northeast.

With help from Russia, and against opposition from the U.S., Syria had already liberated the city of Deir Ezzor from a years-long siege by the Islamic State. Fearing that ISIS-occupied Raqqa could be next to be returned to government hands, the U.S. unleashed a brutal bombing campaign while its allies in the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (a rebranded offshoot of the People's Protection Units or YPG) assaulted the city by ground.

The U.S.-led campaign reduced much of Raqqa to rubble. In contrast to Aleppo, where rebuilding was underway and refugees were returning, Raqqa and outlying towns under U.S. control were cut off from basic government services and plunged into darkness.

The U.S. proceeded to occupy the city and its outlying areas, insisting that the Syrian government and its allies were too weak to prevent the resurgence of ISIS on their own. But almost as soon as U.S. boots hit the ground, ISIS began to gather strength. In fact, a report this August by the UN Security Council's Sanctions Monitoring Team found that in areas under direct American control, ISIS had suddenly found "breathing space to prepare for the next phase of its evolution into a global covert network."

This October, when Iran launched missile strikes against ISIS, nearly killing the ISIS emir, Baghdadi, the Pentagon complained that the missiles had struck only three kilometers from U.S. positions. The protest raised uncomfortable questions about what the top honchos of the Islamic State were doing in such close proximity to the American military, and why the U.S. was unwilling to do what Iran just had done and attack them. No answers from the Pentagon have arrived so far.

Target: Iran

With the appointment this August of James Jeffrey, a self-described "Never Trumper" from the pro-Israel Washington Institute for Near East Policy, as Trump's special representative for Syria engagement, it became clear that the mission to eradicate ISIS was of secondary importance.

In testimony before Congress this December, Jeffrey laid out an agenda that focused heavily on what he called “Iran’s malign influence in the region,” “countering Iran in Syria,” and “remov[ing] all Iranian-commanded forces and proxy forces from the entirety of Syria.” In all, Jeffrey made 30 mentions of Iran, all of them hostile, while referring only 23 times to ISIS. It was clear he had regime change in Tehran on the brain.

Trump, for his part, had been mulling a removal of U.S. forces from northern Syria since at least last Spring, when he put forward a vision for an all-Arab military force funded by Saudi Arabia to replace them. But when Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi was sawed apart inside his country’s embassy in Istanbul this October, Trump’s plan went to pieces as well. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan exploited the Khashoggi saga to perfection, helping to transform Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman from the darling of America’s elite into persona non grata in Washington. As a result, he arranged a front line position for Turkey in the wake of any U.S. withdrawal.

There are now real reasons to fear that a Turkish advance will ignite a resurgence of ISIS. Turkey was not only a source of aid and oil sales to the jihadist group, it currently oversees a mercenary force of Salafi militiamen that includes droves of former Islamic State fighters. If the Turkish onslaught proves destabilizing, Iran and its allied Shia militias could ramp up their deployment in Syria, which would trigger a harsh reaction from Israel and its Beltway cut-outs.

Then again, the Kurdish YPG is in high level negotiations

with Damascus and may team up with the Syrian military to fill the void. From an anti-ISIS standpoint, this is clearly the best option. It is therefore the least popular one in Washington.

Whatever happens in Syria, those who presided over U.S. policy towards the country over the past seven years are in no position to criticize. They set the stage for the entire crisis, propelling the rise of ISIS in a bid to decapitate another insufficiently pliant state. And though they may never face the accountability they deserve, the impending withdrawal of American troops is a long overdue and richly satisfying rebuke.

Max Blumenthal is an award-winning journalist and the author of books including best-selling [Republican Gomorrah: Inside the Movement That Shattered the Party](#), [Goliath: Life and Loathing in Greater Israel](#), [The Fifty One Day War: Ruin and Resistance in Gaza](#), and the forthcoming [The Management of Savagery](#), which will be published by Verso. He has also produced numerous print articles for an array of publications, many video reports and several documentaries including [Je Ne Suis Pas Charlie](#) and the newly released [Killing Gaza](#). Blumenthal founded the [GrayzoneProject.com](#) in 2015 and serves as its editor.

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A Reuters Report on Iran That Spurred US

Diatribes

This year, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made speeches about corruption and property confiscation in Iran that borrowed animating details from a skewed, 5-year-old story that is gaining influence, writes Ivan Kesic.

By Ivan Kesic

in Zagreb, Croatia

Special to Consortium News

When U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo gave speeches about mega corruption in Iran this year, he did not cite a Reuters' [2013 article](#) or give credit to its three reporters; Steve Stecklow, Babak Dehghanpisheh and Yeganeh Torbati.

Instead he presented it as the kind of specialized knowledge that only a high-ranking official such as himself might be in a position to reveal. "Not many people know this," Pompeo told an audience gathered last July at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Library in Simi Valley, California, "but the Ayatollah Khamenei has his own personal, off-the-books hedge fund called the Setad, worth \$95 billion, with a B." Pompeo went on to tell his audience that Khamenei's wealth via Setad was untaxed, ill-gotten, and used as a "slush fund" for the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#).

But a comparison between the 5-year-old Reuters article and Pompeo's speech, which was lauded by *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial board as ["truth telling,"](#) shows a type of symbiosis that could only help cast a backward glow over President Donald Trump's move, last summer, to [reimpose all](#)

sanctions lifted by the Obama's administration's historic nuclear deal with Iran.

The imprint of the Reuters article on Pompeo's speech was obvious in an anecdote about the travails of an elderly woman living in Europe. "The ayatollah fills his coffers by devouring whatever he wants," Pompeo said. "In 2013 the Setad's agents banished an 82-year-old Baha'i woman from her apartment and confiscated the property after a long campaign of harassment. Seizing land from religious minorities and political rivals is just another day at the office for this juggernaut that has interests in everything from real estate to telecoms to ostrich farming."

The 82-year-old Baha'i woman living in Europe clearly matches Pari Vahdat-e-Hagh, a woman the Reuters team put at the very start of their extensive, three-part investigation. Here's how the Reuters article begins: "The 82-year-old Iranian woman keeps the documents that upended her life in an old suitcase near her bed. She removes them carefully and peers at the tiny Persian script."

While tapping the human-interest aspects of the story, Pompeo's speech steered clear of some of the qualifications that the Reuters reporters and editors injected into their general profile of corruption. Pompeo referred to Khamenei using Setad as a "personal hedge fund," for instance, suggesting personal decadence on the part of the Iranian leader. But the Reuters team was careful to note that it had found no evidence of Khamenei putting the assets to personal use. "Instead, Setad's holdings underpin his power over Iran."

While stipulating that Khamenei's greed was not for money but for power, the Reuters team neglected something of timely and possibly greater relevance. Earlier that same year the U.S. admitted its own longstanding greed for power over this foreign country.

Final CIA Admission

In August 2013—three months before the Reuter's article was published—the CIA finally admitted its role in the 1953 Iranian coup. "Marking the sixtieth anniversary of the overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, the National Security Archive is today posting recently declassified CIA documents on the United States' role in the controversial operation. American and British involvement in Mosaddeq's ouster has long been public knowledge, but today's posting includes what is believed to be the CIA's first formal acknowledgement that the agency helped to plan and execute the coup," the archive said.

This U.S. aggression led directly to two phases of property confiscation in Iran: first under the Shah and then under the religious fundamentalists who overthrew him. Unaccountably, however, the Reuters team ignored the CIA admission so relevant to their story.

To its credit, the Reuters article does allude, early on, to the two inter-related periods of property confiscation in Iran. "How Setad came into those assets also mirrors how the deposed monarchy obtained much of its fortune — by confiscating real estate," the article says. But that sentence only functions as a muffled disclaimer since the team makes no effort to integrate that history into the

laments of people such as Pari Vahdat-e-Hagh, who emotionally drives the story.

Dubious Figure

For anyone familiar with the history of property confiscations in Iran, this ex-pat widow is a dubious figure. In the article, she claims that she lost three apartments in a multi-story building in Tehran, "built with the blood of herself and her husband." She also says her late husband Hussein was imprisoned in 1981 because he began working for a gas company that had been set up to assist unemployed members of the Baha'i faith, and finally executed a year later.

The suggestion is that he was killed as part of a widespread persecution of Bahai'i followers.

What the Reuters reporters and editors omitted to mention, however, is that Hussein had been a [lieutenant in the military](#) regime of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi; the last shah of Iran who was overthrown by the uprising of 1979.

The Shah's name has become so intertwined with UK and U.S. meddling in Iran that his role in setting a pro-western foreign policy is mentioned in the opening sentence of the [Encyclopedia Brittanica](#) entry on him. But the Reuters article places this mention at the end of the story, as deep background. By the time the team discloses the Shah's penchant for confiscating property and flagrant corruption, the reader is in the third section of a three-part article. By that time, the elderly Vahdat-e-Hagh has come and gone. By then, she has cemented herself in the reader's imagination as an unequivocal victim, even though some

obvious questions about her should occur to anyone familiar with the country's history.

How, for instance, did she and her husband come to own such significant property at the center of Iran's capital city? Under the Pahlavi regime, most military personnel were provided with one apartment, not three. In the article, Vahdat-e-Hagh says that she and her husband obtained the property themselves, so presumably they did not inherit it. Could her late husband, Hussein, have been of high importance to the Shah's U.S.-backed regime, which was famous for its lavish handouts to special loyalists?

Such questions float over the article, not only about this particular subject, but many others who are presented to dramatize the ayatollah's misdeeds. Several sources appear as human rights "experts" and lawyers. They are all Iranians living abroad and many have controversial biographical details that go unmentioned. There are similar well-known credibility issues with people who are introduced as respectable scholars and politicians.

The article offers the story of another aggrieved Baha'i family without ever mentioning how such people, in general, had lost property during the Shah's White Revolution of 1963 which was intended to weaken those classes that supported the traditional system, primarily landed elites.

One obvious problem with the article is the distance of the three Reuters journalists from the scene of their story. They are based in New York, London and Dubai and do not reveal their information-gathering methods about Iran, a country that admits very few foreign reporters. So far,

Yeganeh Torbati, the reporter who presumably wrote the first, human-interest part of the story, has not responded to a message to her Facebook account seeking comment. Nor has she responded to an email. Torbati, now based in Washington, was based in Dubai in 2013.

Story with Long Legs

In the years since its publication, the Reuters article has been bubbling up in book citations. Suzanne Maloney mentioned it in her 2015 book “Iran’s Political Economy since the Revolution” as did Misagh Parsa in “Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed” published in [2016](#).

This year Pompeo relied on it in four speeches. Two books published in 2018 place some weight on the Reuters article: “Challenging Theocracy: Ancient Lessons for Global Politics” by David Tabachnick, Toivo Koivukoski and Herminio Meireles Teixeira; and “Losing Legitimacy: The End of Khomeini’s Charismatic Shadow and Regional Security” by Clifton W. Sherrill.

The name Setad, which means “headquarters” in Farsi, has been kicking around Washington for five years, ever since the U.S. imposed sanctions on the group. In June of 2013, the U.S. Treasury Department issued a [press release](#) about Setad and its subsidiaries, with a long list of Persian-named properties that were managing to avoid UN sanctions imposed on the country’s business dealings as a means of discouraging Iran’s enrichment of nuclear-weapon grade uranium.

Six months later, in November, Reuters published its

extensive, three-part investigative package, which now tops Google searches for “Setad.”

The report was the first piece of important follow-up journalism on the U.S. Treasury press release. But in one key piece of wording, editors and reporters almost seem to be straining to move their story ahead of the government’s rendition, to the primary position it now holds in Google search-terms.

“Washington,” according to the article, “had acknowledged Setad’s importance.” Acknowledged? By journalistic conventions that Reuters editors would certainly know, an acknowledgement indicates a reluctant admission, something a source would rather not reveal. Five months earlier, however, the Treasury Department sounded eager to call attention to Setad as “a massive network of front companies hiding assets on behalf of .. Iran’s leadership.”

For hardliners on Iran, the U.S. Treasury press release was important fodder. But it lacked the human drama necessary to stir an audience against the current regime. When the Reuters article came along, with all its historical omissions, it filled that gap.

Ivan Kesic is a Croatia-based freelance writer and open-source data analyst who has contributed to “Balkans Post” & “Sahar Balkan.” He worked as a writer at the Cultural Center of Iran in Zagreb from 2010 to 2016.

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Choose the Top Ten Consortium News Stories of 2018

As part of our Winter Fund Drive, **Consortium News** is asking readers to name the top ten articles CN published during 2018. The results will be announced on Dec. 31.

Happy Holidays from Consortium News

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Vote for the Top 10 CN Stories of the Year

List your top ten choices in the comments section. Among the themes we covered most in 2018 were Iran, Palestine, Syria, Russia-gate, European populism, Intelligence, Media, North Korea, Empire, Immigration and Julian Assange/WikiLeaks.

Here is a list of 50 original stories we have nominated in chronological order but you can choose any that you favor:

Robert Parry's Legacy and the Future of Consortiumnews

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The Mueller Indictments: The Day the Music Died

February 24, 2018

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March 3, 2018

The National Endowment for (Meddling in) Democracy

March 8, 2018

American Public Troubled by 'Deep State'

March 21, 2018

America's Complicated Relationship with International Human Rights Norms

March 30, 2018

King's Legacy Betrayed

April 4, 2018

America's 'Unlimited Imperialists'

April 11, 2018

'A Very Different Journalist': John Pilger's Tribute to Bob Parry

April 15, 2018

Bob Parry: Holding Government and Media to Account

April 15, 2018

It Started Over Lunch and Led to the Exposure of One of the Greatest Scandals in U.S. History

April 16, 2018

War Fever

April 19, 2018

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The Latest Act in Israel's Iran Nuclear Disinformation Campaign

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Israel's Overlooked Strategic Losses in Wars Against Arabs

November 29, 2018

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VIDEO: Pilger Says Assange Denies Meeting Manafort

The Guardian has claimed Paul Manafort visited Julian Assange at the Ecuador embassy. John Pilger visited Assange and tells CN's Joe Lauria Assange strongly denied any such meeting.

Pilger: 'Julian is a touchstone for opposition'

By Joe Lauria

Special to Consortium News

WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange has vehemently denied that he ever met Donald Trump's former campaign manager, according to journalist and filmmaker John Pilger, who met with Assange at Ecuador's embassy in London last week.

Pilger said Assange told him the story published by *The Guardian* on Nov. 27 was a "total fabrication." Pilger told **Consortium News** in an interview for the Unity4J vigil on Friday that "I personally can confirm that did not happen. He said it was a fabrication. It was not possible. The way internal security works at that embassy, it was not possible."

Pilger called *The Guardian* story "an indication of a kind of degradation of the media today and especially of the 'respectable' media. We discussed that a great deal."

Pilger said Assange had been the target of attacks "over the years" that have come "thick and fast." He said: "And for one man to cope with them is an extraordinary feat. Only occasionally does he express anger—he does it as anyone of us would feel—say on an attack like *The Guardian's* utterly false story."

First Visit Since March

Pilger had not visited Assange since before March, when the Ecuadorian government imposed a ban on his internet and phone connection, and limited visitors to his lawyers and family members.

Pilger's impression on seeing him again is that Assange has lost no sharpness of mind after more than six years confined to a small space in the embassy, and now nine months cut off

from the outside world.

“He’s in very good spirits,” Pilger said. “The extraordinary resilience of this man is something to behold. In his own personality, intellectually he is Julian.”

“I can’t say what he’s feeling. His health is probably holding steady but he urgently needs comprehensive diagnostic work done,” said Pilger.

“But people should know that Julian’s spirits, his whole sense of ‘to hell with them,’ and his own resolve to stand up to those who would want to do a great injustice to him is undiminished,” he said. “He’s not leaving, they will have to throw him out. He’s not going anywhere.”

The United States government has admitted that it has indicted Assange for publishing classified documents that revealed apparent U.S. war crimes and corruption. Assange fears that if he leaves the embassy British authorities would arrest him on bail skipping charges and then extradite him to the U.S. for prosecution.

Touchstone of Opposition

Pilger said *The Guardian* story was the best example he could think of that expresses today’s Cold War. “I’ve never known it to be as explicit as it is now. And that fabricated *Guardian* story ... is an example of that.”

He said: “In the first Cold War there was an opposition in those days. There isn’t a popular opposition now. The so-called liberal opposition is so confused, so disorientated, and so, almost wretched, in its uncertainty of its true allegiances, in its collusion, that there isn’t a major

anti-war movement.”

“In many ways, Julian is a touchstone for opposition to so much of what is happening in our world,” said Pilger. “Of all the cases that illustrate resistance to that, there is none like that of Julian Assange.

“And he needs public, popular support. He needs people to go into the street outside the embassy. To go in the streets all over the world, as they have done in the past,” Pilger said.

You can watch the entire, original video of the 20 minute interview with John Pilger here:
