

Amid Missiles and Bombs in Damascus

In this special report to Consortium News from the Syrian capital, Jeff Klein describes a people getting back on their feet after the defeat of jihadists in Ghouta, while explosives remain a part of daily life.

By **Jeff Klein** *Special to Consortium News*

In Damascus



A loud and persistent booming woke everyone up here in the early hours of the morning on Saturday, April 14. To a visitor from Boston it sounded like Fourth of July fireworks over the Charles River. But this was Damascus and the thunder was from exploding missiles in the long-awaited attack by Donald Trump and his British and French allies.

The bombardments started precisely at 4am local time and continued for the better part of an hour. Only the timing was a surprise here, as Trump had been threatening a reprisal attack for the alleged use by the Syrian government of chemical weapons in Eastern Ghouta outside Damascus the previous week.

By all accounts, most Syrians were unfazed by the missile attack. There were [videos](#) of Damascenes cheering from rooftops as air defense rockets were launched over the city to intercept the US, French and British missiles.

Trump's [tweet](#) that the attack had been "perfectly carried out" is likely an overstatement. The Russian and Syrian militaries claim that the majority of the incoming missiles were shot down or diverted electronically from their targets, although this is impossible to verify. But it is being reported that two unexploded missiles were handed over to the Russians for technical examination.

In any case, before and after photos of the alleged military/chemical research center in Damascus show pretty thoroughgoing destruction. But the US attacks had been so fully telegraphed – there were claims that the Russians were informed in advance of the targets – that the buildings were empty and there were no reported fatalities.

Of course, if these Damascus targets had actually been chemical weapons facilities as charged there would have been massive civilian casualties from the fallout. There were none.

A 'Fake' Chemical Attack

Syrians I spoke to here all derided the chemical attack charge as fake news.

Nearly everyone else I met in the region, of varying political views, shared the same opinion. In fact it is hard for anyone to fathom why the Syrian army would use chemical weapons when they were on the verge of military victory in Ghouta. To the question of *cui bono?*(who benefits) it was hard to avoid the sense that only the so-called rebels and the enemies of Syria could gain any advantage from this alleged chemical attack—such as bringing in Western air strikes.

It was an ironic time for an American to be in Syria. Arriving on Friday the 13th from Beirut with a group of international activists, including Americans, Canadians, Brits, Irish, Germans, one Swiss and one Dutch, we passed with some tension and delay at the Syrian-Lebanese border. But ultimately we received our visas after some intervention from the authorities in Damascus.

Our hotel, Beit al Wali, is a beautifully restored Ottoman period mansion in the Bab Touma quarter of the Old City. Syrians had invested heavily in the tourist sector before the war in the expectation of attracting badly needed hard currency, but of course these days there are hardly any foreign visitors apart from a small number of well-to-do Lebanese.

Defending Secular Syria

Bab Touma is a traditionally Christian part of town, but there are also many mosques here, in some cases directly neighboring churches of the 12 Christian denominations said to exist in Syria. Orthodox (Greek, Syrian and Catholic Melchite) are the majority, but there are also Roman Catholic, Maronite, Armenian and even evangelical churches. The restaurants in Bab Touma are frequented by mixed crowds of Muslims and Christians, drinking beer or Arak and smoking shisha (water pipes). Liquor stores and bars are commonplace here.

The morning following the missile attack, after a mostly sleepless night, we were led around the neighborhood by our Syrian translator and guide. Abdul-Razzaq, who had worked in the tourist industry for 25 years, was knowledgeable and professional.

Like many Syrians, Abdul-Razzaq readily acknowledged the need for reforms in the country and is critical of high-level corruption. But he also believes that winning the war is the immediate priority. He tells us “You don’t argue about what color to paint the walls while your house is burning down.” He adds: “This is not a war of Syrians, but an attack by the enemies of Syria.” That was a very common sentiment in Syria, but falls into the category of Syrian voices which are rarely heard in the US.

Our guide seemed to know everyone in the old city. He questioned dozens of people we met on the streets and in the shops on their response to Trump’s

missile attack. My Arabic is good enough to understand the questions and answers, so there was no question of mistranslation. Nor was there any sign of coerced response.

Most locals in Bab Touma were buoyed by the recent government recapture of Eastern Ghouta, where the neighboring rebel-held town of Jobar had been the source of daily rockets and mortars launched against this part of the city. We were shown many sites of these attacks on the walls and roads of the area, including the locations where people had been “martyred.” More than a hundred Damascus civilians had been killed by these attacks in recent months – of course little reported in the Western press – and the residents were clearly relieved that their town was now safe.

The American Donkey

Compared to this, Trump’s missiles were a minor annoyance. Nearly everyone ridiculed the attack as a “show” from that American “donkey.” The atmosphere in the city was much more relaxed than it had been when I visited two years ago, reflecting a string of government military advances since then.

Of course, the missile attack was also derided by many war cheerleaders of both parties in Washington as “insufficient.” Israel and rebel supporters inside and outside the country expressed their disappointment. Sadly, the justification for the attack was also given credence by many self-described US progressives. Anyone who doubted the veracity of the supposed chemical attack in Duma, or whose first priority was to oppose illegal attacks on Syria has been smeared viciously.

Pearson Sharp, a reporter for the right-wing libertarian One America News Network and former Trump supporter was [accused](#), in effect, of being a Russian agent by the progressive media for his [on-the-scene reporting](#) from Duma; at the same time he was being relentlessly attacked by viewers of his network for being disloyal to Trump.

The evening after the missile attack, hotel Beit al-Wali prepared a festive dinner for us – it was the birthday of Mario, one of the Germans among our group. Present also was the British journalist [Vanessa Beeley](#), who has exposed much of the phony Western propaganda coming out of Syria – and been [vilified](#) for it – together with some locals, including the very colorful Syrian comic who goes by the name of “Treka.” [Treka](#) grew up in Nigeria among the Syrian expat business community there, sports long dreads and speaks in very colloquial but accented English. He defies all stereotypes about Arabs and Syrians. Treka has posted many videos critical of the MSM narrative abroad, and his latest, deriding the claim of the government chemical attack in Ghouta, is [here](#).

On the Road Back to Damascus

Returning to Damascus on Thursday April 19 after a visit to Aleppo, we were met this time by the roar of jets over the city and the continuous thunder of bombs and artillery. The Syrian army and their Russian ally were attacking the neighborhoods and Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk on the southern outskirts of the city. It was strange to be driving along roads in Damascus less than a kilometer away from the bombing. Few residents of the capital seemed to pay any attention at all, the nonchalant routine of 7 years of war.

Yarmouk had been long held by elements of terrorist groups Daesh (ISIS) and the al-Qaeda affiliated Nusra Front (now known under the name Jabhat Fateh al-Sham). Nearly all the original Palestinians had long gone, becoming refugees for the second time elsewhere in Syria or in Lebanon. Some of them were fighting in Palestinian units alongside the Syrian army.

After the recapture of Eastern Ghouta, this was an effort by the government to clear out the last remaining opposition-held zone near the capital. Reports are that the rebels have agreed to evacuate, though as this is being written the air and artillery attacks are continuing.

If Yarmouk is retaken in its entirety it will represent another major military victory for the Syrian government and a key step toward defeating the remains of the armed insurgency.

In fact, the comprehensive military defeat of the rebels, now overwhelmingly dominated by sectarian religious extremists, remains the principle hope for peace and reconciliation within the country. This was the fervent wish of nearly all the Syrians we spoke with – in the government-held areas to be sure, but this now represents more than 80% of the population.

The task of reconstruction will be immense. As we drove back to Damascus on Thursday we passed mile after mile of devastated landscape just outside the capital in what had shortly before been territory held by the armed insurgents in Eastern Ghouta. As in Aleppo, rebuilding has already begun, but it will take an enormous amount of resources to complete.

By rights, the nations who have intervened to destroy Syria – the US, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Israel – should bear the cost of reconstruction, but this this is unlikely to occur. These same countries have not stopped their attacks on Syria, nor are there any signs that the US is planning to give up its illegal occupation of the east of the country. Nevertheless, justice demands a reckoning.

The reckoning should also include Leftists or progressives inside and outside

Syria who enthusiastically echo the MSM propaganda war and even clamor for more attacks in the name of a “revolution” that had ceased to be a plausible reality years ago.

Not so far back, those who opposed the Iraq War were smeared as supporters of Saddam Hussein, a charge that honest anti-war activists easily dismissed. Today, defending Syria from foreign aggression and advocating the right of Syrians to choose their own future apparently makes one an “[Assad apologist](#)” in some Progressive circles. These same commentators seem to ignore civilian casualties from the US-led aerial destruction of Mosul and Raqqa, while rarely even mentioning the ongoing US and Turkish illegal occupation of Syrian territory.

Syria has not been the proudest moment for the international Left.

Jeff Klein is an anti-war activist who has written and spoken frequently on the Middle East

How Many Millions Have Been Killed in America’s Post-9/11 Wars? Part 3: Libya, Syria, Somalia and Yemen

In the third and final part of his series, Nicolas JS Davies investigates the death toll of U.S. covert and proxy wars in Libya, Syria, Somalia and Yemen and underscores the importance of comprehensive war mortality studies.

By Nicolas J S Davies *Special to Consortium News*



In the first two parts of this report, I have estimated that about 2.4 million people have been killed as a result of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, while about 1.2 million have been killed in Afghanistan and Pakistan as a result of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan. In the third and final part of this report, I will estimate how many people have been killed as a result of U.S. military and CIA interventions in Libya, Syria, Somalia and Yemen.

Of the countries that the U.S. has attacked and destabilized since 2001, only Iraq has been the subject of comprehensive “active” mortality studies that can reveal otherwise unreported deaths. An “active” mortality study is one that “actively” surveys households to find deaths that have not previously been

reported by news reports or other published sources.

These studies are often carried out by people who work in the field of public health, like Les Roberts at Columbia University, Gilbert Burnham at Johns Hopkins and Riyadh Lafta at Mustansiriya University in Baghdad, who co-authored the 2006 Lancet study of Iraq war mortality. In defending their studies in Iraq and their results, they emphasized that their Iraqi survey teams were independent of the occupation government and that that was an important factor in the objectivity of their studies and the willingness of people in Iraq to talk honestly with them.

Comprehensive mortality studies in other war-torn countries (like Angola, Bosnia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guatemala, Iraq, Kosovo, Rwanda, Sudan and Uganda) have revealed total numbers of deaths that are 5 to 20 times those previously revealed by “passive” reporting based on news reports, hospital records and/or human rights investigations.

In the absence of such comprehensive studies in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, Syria, Somalia and Yemen, I have evaluated passive reports of war deaths and tried to assess what proportion of actual deaths these passive reports are likely to have counted by the methods they have used, based on ratios of actual deaths to passively reported deaths found in other war-zones.

I have only estimated violent deaths. None of my estimates include deaths from the indirect effects of these wars, such as the destruction of hospitals and health systems, the spread of otherwise preventable diseases and the effects of malnutrition and environmental pollution, which have also been substantial in all these countries.

For Iraq, my final estimate of about 2.4 million people killed was based on accepting the estimates of the 2006 Lancet study and the 2007 Opinion Research Business (ORB) survey, which were consistent with each other, and then applying the same ratio of actual deaths to passively reported deaths (11.5:1) as between the Lancet study and Iraq Body Count (IBC) in 2006 to IBC's count for the years since 2007.

For Afghanistan, I estimated that about 875,000 Afghans have been killed. I explained that the annual reports on civilian casualties by the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) are based only on investigations completed by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), and that they knowingly exclude large numbers of reports of civilian deaths that the AIHRC has not yet investigated or for which it has not completed its investigations. UNAMA's reports also lack any reporting at all from many areas of the country where the Taliban and other Afghan resistance forces are active, and where many or most

U.S. air strikes and night raids therefore take place.

I concluded that UNAMA's reporting of civilian deaths in Afghanistan appears to be as inadequate as the extreme under-reporting found at the end of the Guatemalan Civil War, when the UN-sponsored Historical Verification Commission revealed 20 times more deaths than previously reported.

For Pakistan, I estimated that about 325,000 people had been killed. That was based on published estimates of combatant deaths, and on applying an average of the ratios found in previous wars (12.5:1) to the number of civilian deaths reported by the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) in India.

Estimating Deaths in Libya, Syria, Somalia and Yemen

In the third and final part of this report, I will estimate the death toll caused by U.S. covert and proxy wars in Libya, Syria, Somalia and Yemen.

Senior U.S. military officers have hailed the U.S. doctrine of covert and proxy war that found its full flowering under the Obama administration as a "disguised, quiet, media-free" approach to war, and have traced the development of this doctrine back to U.S. wars in Central America in the 1980s. While the U.S. recruitment, training, command and control of death squads in Iraq was dubbed "the Salvador Option," U.S. strategy in Libya, Syria, Somalia and Yemen has in fact followed this model even more closely.

These wars have been catastrophic for the people of all these countries, but the U.S.'s "disguised, quiet, media-free" approach to them has been so successful in propaganda terms that most Americans know very little about the U.S. role in the intractable violence and chaos that has engulfed them.

The very public nature of the illegal but largely symbolic missile strikes on Syria on April 14, 2018 stands in sharp contrast to the "disguised, quiet, media-free" U.S.-led bombing campaign that has destroyed Raqqa, Mosul and several other Syrian and Iraqi cities with more than 100,000 bombs and missiles since 2014.

The people of Mosul, Raqqa, Kobane, Sirte, Fallujah, Ramadi, Tawergha and Deir Ez-Zor have died like trees falling in a forest where there were no Western reporters or TV crews to record their massacres. As Harold Pinter asked of earlier U.S. war crimes in his 2005 Nobel acceptance speech,

"Did they take place? And are they in all cases attributable to U.S. foreign policy? The answer is yes, they did take place, and they are in all cases attributable to American foreign policy. But you wouldn't know it. It never happened. Nothing ever happened. Even while it was happening, it wasn't

happening. It didn't matter. It was of no interest."

For more detailed background on the critical role the U.S. has played in each of these wars, please read my article, "Giving War Too Many Chances," published in January 2018.

Libya

The only legal justification for NATO and its Arab monarchist allies to have dropped at least 7,700 bombs and missiles on Libya and invaded it with special operations forces beginning in February 2011 was UN Security Council resolution 1973, which authorized "all necessary measures" for the narrowly defined purpose of protecting civilians in Libya.

But the war instead killed far more civilians than any estimate of the number killed in the initial rebellion in February and March 2011, which ranged from 1,000 (a UN estimate) to 6,000 (according to the Libyan Human Rights League).

So the war clearly failed in its stated, authorized purpose, to protect civilians, even as it succeeded in a different and unauthorized one: the illegal overthrow of the Libyan government.

SC resolution 1973 expressly prohibited "a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory." But NATO and its allies launched a covert invasion of Libya by thousands of Qatari and Western special operations forces, who planned the rebels' advance across the country, called in air strikes against government forces and led the final assault on the Bab al-Aziziya military headquarters in Tripoli.

Qatari Chief of Staff Major General Hamad bin Ali al-Atiya, proudly told AFP,

"We were among them and the numbers of Qataris on the ground were in the hundreds in every region. Training and communications had been in Qatari hands. Qatar... supervised the rebels' plans because they are civilians and did not have enough military experience. We acted as the link between the rebels and NATO forces."

There are credible reports that a French security officer may even have delivered the coup de grace that killed Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, after he was captured, tortured and sodomized with a knife by the "NATO rebels."

A parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry in the U.K. in 2016 concluded that a "limited intervention to protect civilians drifted into an opportunistic policy of regime change by military means," resulting in, "political and economic collapse, inter-militia and inter-tribal warfare, humanitarian and migrant crises, widespread human rights violations, the spread of Gaddafi regime

weapons across the region and the growth of Isil [Islamic State] in north Africa.”

Passive Reports of Civilian Deaths in Libya

Once the Libyan government was overthrown, journalists tried to inquire about the sensitive subject of civilian deaths, which was so critical to the legal and political justifications for the war. But the National Transitional Council (NTC), the unstable new government formed by Western-backed exiles and rebels, stopped issuing public casualty estimates and ordered hospital staff not to release information to reporters.

In any case, as in Iraq and Afghanistan, morgues were overflowing during the war and many people buried their loved ones in their backyards or wherever they could, without taking them to hospitals.

A rebel leader estimated in August 2011 that 50,000 Libyans had been killed.

Then, on September 8th 2011, Naji Barakat, the NTC’s new health minister, issued a statement that 30,000 people had been killed and another 4,000 were missing, based on a survey of hospitals, local officials and rebel commanders in the majority of the country that the NTC by then controlled. He said it would take several more weeks to complete the survey, so he expected the final figure to be higher.

Barakat’s statement did not include separate counts of combatant and civilian deaths. But he said that about half of the 30,000 reported dead were troops loyal to the government, including 9,000 members of the Khamis Brigade, led by Gaddafi’s son Khamis. Barakat asked the public to report deaths in their families and details of missing persons when they came to mosques for prayers that Friday. The NTC’s estimate of 30,000 people killed appeared to consist mainly of combatants on both sides.

The most comprehensive survey of war deaths since the end of the 2011 war in Libya was an “epidemiological community-based study” titled “Libyan Armed Conflict 2011: Mortality, Injury and Population Displacement.” It was authored by three medical professors from Tripoli, and published in the *African Journal of Emergency Medicine* in 2015.

The authors took records of war deaths, injuries and displacement collected by the Ministry of Housing and Planning, and sent teams to conduct face-to-face interviews with a member of each family to verify how many members of their household were killed, wounded or displaced. They did not try to separate the killing of civilians from the deaths of combatants.

Nor did they try to statistically estimate previously unreported deaths through

the “cluster sample survey” method of the Lancet study in Iraq. But the Libyan Armed Conflict study is the most complete record of confirmed deaths in the war in Libya up to February 2012, and it confirmed the deaths of at least 21,490 people.

In 2014, the ongoing chaos and factional fighting in Libya flared up into what Wikipedia now calls a second Libyan Civil War. A group called Libya Body Count (LBC) began tabulating violent deaths in Libya, based on media reports, on the model of Iraq Body Count (IBC). But LBC only did so for three years, from January 2014 until December 2016. It counted 2,825 deaths in 2014, 1,523 in 2015 and 1,523 in 2016. (The LBC website says it was just a coincidence that the number was identical in 2015 and 2016.)

The U.K.-based Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project has also kept a count of violent deaths in Libya. ACLED counted 4,062 deaths in 2014-6, compared with 5,871 counted by Libya Body Count. For the remaining periods between March 2012 and March 2018 that LBC did not cover, ACLED has counted 1,874 deaths.

If LBC had covered the whole period since March 2012, and found the same proportionally higher number than ACLED as it did for 2014-6, it would have counted 8,580 people killed.

Estimating How Many People Have Really Been Killed in Libya

Combining the figures from the Libyan Armed Conflict 2011 study and our combined, projected figure from Libya Body Count and ACLED gives a total of 30,070 passively reported deaths since February 2011.

The Libyan Armed Conflict (LAC) study was based on official records in a country that had not had a stable, unified government for about 4 years, while Libya Body Count was a fledgling effort to emulate Iraq Body Count that tried to cast a wider net by not relying only on English-language news sources.

In Iraq, the ratio between the 2006 *Lancet* study and Iraq Body Count was higher because IBC was only counting civilians, while the *Lancet* study counted Iraqi combatants as well as civilians. Unlike Iraq Body Count, both our main passive sources in Libya counted both civilians and combatants. Based on the one-line descriptions of each incident in the Libya Body Count database, LBC’s total appears to include roughly half combatants and half civilians.

Military casualties are generally counted more accurately than civilian ones, and military forces have an interest in accurately assessing enemy casualties as well as identifying their own. The opposite is true of civilian casualties, which are nearly always evidence of war crimes that the forces who killed them

have a strong interest in suppressing.

So, in Afghanistan and Pakistan, I treated combatants and civilians separately, applying typical ratios between passive reporting and mortality studies only to civilians, while accepting reported combatant deaths as they were passively reported.

But the forces fighting in Libya are not a national army with the strict chain of command and organizational structure that results in accurate reporting of military casualties in other countries and conflicts, so both civilian and combatant deaths appear to be significantly under-reported by my two main sources, the Libya Armed Conflict study and Libya Body Count. In fact, the National Transitional Council's (NTC) estimates from August and September 2011 of 30,000 deaths were already much higher than the numbers of war deaths in the LAC study.

When the 2006 *Lancet* study of mortality in Iraq was published, it revealed 14 times the number of deaths counted in Iraq Body Count's list of civilian deaths. But IBC later discovered more deaths from that period, reducing the ratio between the *Lancet* study's estimate and IBC's revised count to 11.5:1.

The combined totals from the Libya Armed Conflict 2011 study and Libya Body Count appear to be a larger proportion of total violent deaths than Iraq Body Count has counted in Iraq, mainly because LAC and LBC both counted combatants as well as civilians, and because Libya Body Count included deaths reported in Arabic news sources, while IBC relies almost entirely on English language news sources and generally requires "a minimum of two independent data sources" before recording each death.

In other conflicts, passive reporting has never succeeded in counting more than a fifth of the deaths found by comprehensive, "active" epidemiological studies. Taking all these factors into account, the true number of people killed in Libya appears to be somewhere between five and twelve times the numbers counted by the Libya Armed Conflict 2011 study, Libya Body Count and ACLED.

So I estimate that about 250,000 Libyans have been killed in the war, violence and chaos that the U.S. and its allies unleashed in Libya in February 2011, and which continues to the present day. Taking 5:1 and 12:1 ratios to passively counted deaths as outer limits, the minimum number of people that have been killed would be 150,000 and the maximum would be 360,000.

Syria

The "disguised, quiet, media-free" U.S. role in Syria began in late 2011 with a CIA operation to funnel foreign fighters and weapons through Turkey and Jordan

into Syria, working with Qatar and Saudi Arabia to militarize unrest that began with peaceful Arab Spring protests against Syria's Baathist government.

The mostly leftist and democratic Syrian political groups coordinating non-violent protests in Syria in 2011 strongly opposed these foreign efforts to unleash a civil war, and issued strong statements opposing violence, sectarianism and foreign intervention.

But even as a December 2011 Qatari-sponsored opinion poll found that 55% of Syrians supported their government, the U.S. and its allies were committed to adapting their Libyan regime change model to Syria, knowing full well from the outset that this war would be much bloodier and more destructive.

The CIA and its Arab monarchist partners eventually funneled thousands of tons of weapons and thousands of foreign Al-Qaeda-linked jihadis into Syria. The weapons came first from Libya, then from Croatia and the Balkans. They included howitzers, missile launchers and other heavy weapons, sniper rifles, rocket propelled grenades, mortars and small arms, and the U.S. eventually directly supplied powerful anti-tank missiles.

Meanwhile, instead of cooperating with Kofi Annan's UN-backed efforts to bring peace to Syria in 2012, the U.S. and its allies held three "Friends of Syria" conferences, where they pursued their own "Plan B," pledging ever-growing support to the increasingly Al-Qaeda-dominated rebels. Kofi Annan quit his thankless role in disgust after Secretary of State Clinton and her British, French and Saudi allies cynically undermined his peace plan.

The rest, as they say, is history, a history of ever-spreading violence and chaos that has drawn the U.S., U.K., France, Russia, Iran and all of Syria's neighbors into its bloody vortex. As Phyllis Bennis of the Institute for Policy Studies has observed, these external powers have all been ready to fight over Syria "to the last Syrian."

The bombing campaign that President Obama launched against Islamic State in 2014 is the heaviest bombing campaign since the U.S. War in Vietnam, dropping more than 100,000 bombs and missiles on Syria and Iraq. Patrick Cockburn, the veteran Middle East correspondent of the U.K.'s *Independent* newspaper, recently visited Raqqa, formerly Syria's 6th largest city, and wrote that, "The destruction is total."

"In other Syrian cities bombed or shelled to the point of oblivion there is at least one district that has survived intact," Cockburn wrote. "This is the case even in Mosul in Iraq, though much of it was pounded into rubble. But in Raqqa the damage and the demoralization are all pervasive. When something does work,

such as a single traffic light, the only one to do so in the city, people express surprise.”

Estimating Violent Deaths in Syria

Every public estimate of the numbers of people killed in Syria that I have found comes directly or indirectly from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), run by Rami Abdulrahman in Coventry in the U.K. He is a former political prisoner from Syria, and he works with four assistants in Syria who in turn draw on a network of about 230 anti-government activists across the country. His work receives some funding from the European Union, and also reportedly some from the U.K. government.

Wikipedia cites the Syrian Centre for Policy Research as a separate source with a higher fatality estimate, but this is in fact a projection from SOHR's figures. Lower estimates by the UN appear to also be based mainly on SOHR's reports.

SOHR has been criticized for its unabashedly opposition viewpoint, leading some to question the objectivity of its data. It appears to have seriously undercounted civilians killed by U.S. air strikes, but this could also be due to the difficulty and danger of reporting from IS-held territory, as has also been the case in Iraq.

SOHR acknowledges that its count cannot be a total estimate of all the people killed in Syria. In its most recent report in March 2018, it added 100,000 to its tally to compensate for under-reporting, another 45,000 to account for prisoners killed or disappeared in government custody and 12,000 for people killed, disappeared or missing in Islamic State or other rebel custody.

Leaving aside these adjustments, SOHR's March 2018 report documents the deaths of 353,935 combatants and civilians in Syria. That total is comprised of 106,390 civilians; 63,820 Syrian troops; 58,130 members of pro-government militias (including 1,630 from Hezbollah and 7,686 other foreigners); 63,360 Islamic State, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) and other Islamist jihadis; 62,039 other anti-government combatants; and 196 unidentified bodies.

Breaking this down simply into civilians and combatants, that is 106,488 civilians and 247,447 combatants killed (with the 196 unidentified bodies divided equally), including 63,820 Syrian Army troops.

The SOHR's count is not a comprehensive statistical survey like the 2006 Lancet study in Iraq. But regardless of its pro-rebel viewpoint, the SOHR appears to be one of the most comprehensive efforts to “passively” count the dead in any

recent war.

Like military institutions in other countries, the Syrian Army probably keeps fairly accurate casualty figures for its own troops. Excluding actual military casualties, it would be unprecedented for SOHR to have counted more than 20% of other people killed in Syria's Civil War. But SOHR's reporting may well be as thorough as any previous efforts to count the dead by "passive" methods.

Taking the SOHR's passively reported figures for non-military war deaths as 20% of the real total killed would mean that 1.45 million civilians and non-military combatants have been killed. After adding the 64,000 Syrian troops killed to that number, I estimate that about 1.5 million people have been killed in Syria.

If SOHR has been more successful than any previous "passive" effort to count the dead in a war, and has counted 25% or 30% of the people killed, the real number killed could be as low as 1 million. If it has not been as successful as it seems, and its count is closer to what has been typical in other conflicts, then as many as 2 million people may well have been killed.

Somalia

Most Americans remember the U.S. intervention in Somalia that led to the "Black Hawk Down" incident and the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 1993. But most Americans do not remember, or may never have known, that the U.S. made another "disguised, quiet, media-free" intervention in Somalia in 2006, in support of an Ethiopian military invasion.

Somalia was finally "pulling itself up by its bootstraps" under the governance of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), a union of local traditional courts who agreed to work together to govern the country. The ICU allied with a warlord in Mogadishu and defeated the other warlords who had ruled private fiefdoms since the collapse of the central government in 1991. People who knew the country well hailed the ICU as a hopeful development for peace and stability in Somalia.

But in the context of its "war on terror," the U.S. government identified the Islamic Courts Union as an enemy and a target for military action. The U.S. allied with Ethiopia, Somalia's traditional regional rival (and a majority Christian country), and conducted air strikes and special forces operations to support an Ethiopian invasion of Somalia to remove the ICU from power. As in every other country the U.S. and its proxies have invaded since 2001, the effect was to plunge Somalia back into violence and chaos that continues to this day.

Estimating the Death Toll in Somalia

Passive sources put the violent death toll in Somalia since the U.S.-backed

Ethiopian invasion in 2006 at 20,171 (Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) – through 2016) and 24,631 (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)). But an award-winning local NGO, the Elman Peace and Human Rights Centre in Mogadishu, which tracked deaths only for 2007 and 2008, counted 16,210 violent deaths in those two years alone, 4.7 times the number counted by UCDP and 5.8 times ACLED's tally for those two years.

In Libya, Libya Body Count only counted 1.45 times as many deaths as ACLED. In Somalia, Elman Peace counted 5.8 times more than ACLED – the difference between the two was 4 times as great. This suggests that Elman Peace's counting was about twice as thorough as Libya Body Count's, while ACLED seems to be about half as effective at counting war deaths in Somalia as in Libya.

UCDP logged higher numbers of deaths than ACLED from 2006 until 2012, while ACLED has published higher numbers than UCDP since 2013. The average of their two counts gives a total of 23,916 violent deaths from July 2006 to 2017. If Elman Peace had kept counting war deaths and had continued to find 5.25 (the average of 4.7 and 5.8) times the numbers found by these international monitoring groups, it would by now have counted about 125,000 violent deaths since the U.S.-backed Ethiopian invasion in July 2006.

But while Elman Peace counted many more deaths than UCDP or ACLED, this was still just a "passive" count of war deaths in Somalia. To estimate the total number of war deaths that have resulted from the U.S. decision to destroy Somalia's fledgling ICU government, we must multiply these figures by a ratio that falls somewhere between those found in other conflicts, between 5:1 and 20:1.

Applying a 5:1 ratio to my projection of what the Elman Project might have counted by now yields a total of 625,000 deaths. Applying a 20:1 ratio to the much lower counts by UCDP and ACLED would give a lower figure of 480,000.

It is very unlikely that the Elman Project was counting more than 20% of actual deaths all over Somalia. On the other hand, UCDP and ACLED were only counting reports of deaths in Somalia from their bases in Sweden and the U.K., based on published reports, so they may well have counted less than 5% of actual deaths.

If the Elman Project was only capturing 15% of total deaths instead of 20%, that would suggest that 830,000 people have been killed since 2006. If UCDP's and ACLED's counts have captured more than 5% of total deaths, the real total could be lower than 480,000. But that would imply that the Elman Project was identifying an even higher proportion of actual deaths, which would be unprecedented for such a project.

So I estimate that the true number of people killed in Somalia since 2006 must be somewhere between 500,000 and 850,000, with most likely about 650,000 violent deaths.

Yemen

The U.S. is part of a coalition that has been bombing Yemen since 2015 in an effort to restore former President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi to power. Hadi was elected in 2012 after Arab Spring protests and armed uprisings forced Yemen's previous U.S.-backed dictator, Ali Abdullah Saleh, to resign in November 2011.

Hadi's mandate was to draw up a new constitution and organize a new election within two years. He did neither of these things, so the powerful Zaidi Houthi movement invaded the capital in September 2014, placed Hadi under house arrest and demanded that he and his government fulfill their mandate and organize a new election.

The Zaidis are a unique Shiite sect who make up 45% of Yemen's population.

Zaidi Imams ruled most of Yemen for over a thousand years. Sunnis and Zaidis have lived together peacefully in Yemen for centuries, intermarriage is common and they pray in the same mosques.

The last Zaidi Imam was overthrown in a civil war in the 1960s. In that war, the Saudis supported the Zaidi royalists, while Egypt invaded Yemen to support the republican forces who eventually formed the Yemen Arab Republic in 1970.

In 2014, Hadi refused to cooperate with the Houthis, and resigned in January 2015. He fled to Aden, his hometown, and then to Saudi Arabia, which launched a savage U.S.-backed bombing campaign and naval blockade to try to restore him to power.

While Saudi Arabia is conducting most of the air strikes, the U.S. has sold most of the planes, bombs, missiles and other weapons it is using. The U.K. is the Saudis' second largest arms supplier. Without U.S. satellite intelligence and in-air refueling, Saudi Arabia could not conduct airstrikes all over Yemen as it is doing. So a cut-off of U.S. weapons, in-air refueling and diplomatic support could be decisive in ending the war.

Estimating War Deaths in Yemen

Published estimates of war deaths in Yemen are based on regular surveys of hospitals there by the World Health Organization, often relayed by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). The most recent estimate, from December 2017, is that 9,245 people have been killed, including 5,558 civilians.

But UNOCHA's December 2017 report included a note that, "Due to the high number of health facilities that are not functioning or partially functioning as a result of the conflict, these numbers are underreported and likely higher."

Even when hospitals are fully functioning, many people killed in war do not ever make it to a hospital. Several hospitals in Yemen have been struck by Saudi air strikes, there is a naval blockade that restricts imports of medicine, and supplies of electricity, water, food and fuel have all been affected by the bombing and the blockade. So the WHO's summaries of mortality reports from hospitals are likely to be a small fraction of the real numbers of people killed.

ACLED reports a slightly lower figure than the WHO: 7,846 through the end of 2017. But unlike the WHO, ACLED has up to date data for 2018, and reports another 2,193 deaths since January. If the WHO continues to report 18% more deaths than ACLED, the WHO's total up to the present would be 11,833.

Even UNOCHA and the WHO acknowledge substantial underreporting of war deaths in Yemen, and the ratio between the WHO's passive reports and actual deaths appears to be toward the higher end of the range found in other wars, which has varied between 5:1 and 20:1. I estimate that about 175,000 people have been killed – 15 times the numbers reported by the WHO and ACLED – with a minimum of 120,000 and a maximum of 240,000.

The True Human Cost of U.S. Wars

Altogether, in the three parts of this report, I have estimated that America's post-9/11 wars have killed about 6 million people. Maybe the true number is only 5 million. Or maybe it is 7 million. But I am quite certain that it is several millions.

It is not only hundreds of thousands, as many otherwise well-informed people believe, because compilations of "passive reporting" can never amount to more than a fraction of the actual numbers of people killed in countries living through the kind of violence and chaos that our country's aggression has unleashed on them since 2001.

The systematic reporting of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has surely captured a larger fraction of actual deaths than the small number of completed investigations deceptively reported as mortality estimates by the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan. But both of them still only represent a fraction of total deaths.

And the true number of people killed is most definitely not in the tens of thousands, as most of the general public in the U.S. and in the U.K. have been

led to believe, according to opinion polls.

We urgently need public health experts to conduct comprehensive mortality studies in all the countries the U.S. has plunged into war since 2001, so that the world can respond appropriately to the true scale of death and destruction these wars have caused.

As Barbara Lee presciently warned her colleagues before she cast her lone dissenting vote in 2001, we have “become the evil we deplore.” But these wars have not been accompanied by fearsome military parades (not yet) or speeches about conquering the world. Instead they have been politically justified by “information warfare” to demonize enemies and fabricate crises, and then waged in a “disguised, quiet, media free” way, to hide their cost in human blood from the American public and the world.

After 16 years of war, about 6 million violent deaths, 6 countries utterly destroyed and many more destabilized, it is urgent that the American public come to terms with the true human cost of our country’s wars and how we have been manipulated and misled into turning a blind eye to them – before they go on even longer, destroy more countries, further undermine the rule of international law and kill millions more of our fellow human beings.

As Hannah Arendt wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “We can no longer afford to take that which is good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion. The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition. This is the reality in which we live.”

Nicolas J.S. Davies is the author of *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. He also wrote the chapter on “Obama at War” in *Grading the 44th President: a Report Card on Barack Obama’s First Term as a Progressive Leader*.

Israelis Continue to Open Fire on Gaza Protestors: An Eyewitness Account

An Interview with Gaza-based Palestinian Journalist, Wafa Al-Udaini

By Dennis J Bernstein



According to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), the Palestinian death toll since March 30, 2018 “has risen to 33, including 4 children and 1 photojournalist, and the number of those wounded has risen to 2,436, including 410 children, 66 women, 22 journalists and 9 paramedics.”

There have been no Israeli casualties.

According to PCHR, on Friday, April 20th, Israeli snipers “killed 4 Palestinian civilians, including a child, and wounded 274 others, including 41 children, 6 women and 1 journalist, in addition to hundreds suffering tear gas inhalation, including PCHR’s fieldworkers who were documenting the Israeli forces’ suppression of the entirely peaceful demonstrations near the border fence with Israel, east of the Gaza Strip.”

PCHR maintains that “for the fourth week in a row and upon a decision by the Israeli highest military and political echelons, the Israeli forces used lethal force against the peaceful protesters, who did not pose any threat to the soldiers’ life.” There is a cell phone camera recording now being widely distributed that appears to show Israeli snipers and soldiers cheering as they gun down unarmed Palestinians fleeing in the distance.

On April 17th, I spoke with Gaza-based Palestinian Journalist Wafa Al-Udaini who has been an eyewitness to all the Gaza protests in the ongoing anti-occupation, Right to Return protests since late March. Al-Udaini’s friend and colleague, Yaser Murtaja, a photojournalist and camera person for a Gaza-based media production company was shot on April 6th by Israeli sharpshooters and died the next day of his wounds.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, “Pictures posted on social media by local journalists and witness testimony from local journalists show that Murtaja was wearing a bulletproof vest and helmet that were both clearly marked with the words “PRESS” when he was hit.”

Today I interview the little brave man. He said, he went to protest peacefully to get back occupied lands #GreatReturnMarch pic.twitter.com/5RMUc9eGNq

– Wafa A Al-Udaini (@wafa_Gaza) April 18, 2018

In the following interview, Al-Udaini offers an eye-witness recounting of the initial protest in Gaza on March 30th, in which at least 18 protesters were killed by Israeli snipers and well over a thousand people were wounded.

Dennis Bernstein: We are going to hear now some eyewitness accounts, some very troubling testimony of the way in which Israeli snipers, from a long distance away, behind a fence and across a field, began to gun down hundreds of people, wounding over a thousand protesters and killing at least 18 Palestinians on the first day. It was truly horrifying.

Some people were protesting, some were praying, and others, like Wafa Al-Udaini, were sitting down for a meal during the long day of anti-occupation protests, when Israeli snipers opened fire and began to gun down unarmed Palestinians.

Wafa Al-Udaini, tell us a bit of your background and then tell us what you witnessed on March 30th and the other protest days that you were an eye-witness to.

Wafa Al-Udaini: I live here in the Gaza Strip. My grandparents were expelled from Beersheba by Israeli gangs in 1948. Now I live as a Palestinian refugee in the Gaza Strip. I work as a journalist for different websites and on radio. I am also an activist, the leader of a youth group here composed of students and journalists who work to present Palestinian issues to the world.

We were so excited about the Great March of Return protests, which began on the 13th of March. It was a peaceful and secular march, where all Palestinians, male and female, elderly and children, came to the border fence to resist peacefully. I took my family with me and we brought along something to eat and drink. We sat together and shared our food. We were asserting our right to demonstrate and reminding the world of our right to return to the land we occupied before we were driven from our homes. I brought my camera and intended to livestream the event. We were about 700 meters from the Israeli side.

DB: Could you talk about when you realized that the soldiers were opening fire on civilians? Were people around you being shot?

WAU: At the moment, I was interviewing people around me about what life was like before 1948, stories they had heard from their grandparents. Then suddenly I heard shots and I saw people running. I asked what was happening and they told me that the Israelis were opening fire. A man fleeing with his children told me some had been murdered. The Israelis began throwing teargas and they gunned down people who were fleeing.

DB: Let me explain to people that there is the border fence, which is electrified, and then there is a major piece of land between the fence and where the protest was happening. My understanding is that the soldiers were sharpshooters and they were picking people off from the other side of the fence.

WAU: Exactly. It had nothing to do with “defense,” because of the distance and because we were unarmed. They fired on women holding the Palestinian flag. This was their crime. Claims of self defense are just ludicrous.

DB: A friend of yours, a journalist, Yaser Murtaja, was gunned down on April 6th. I understand he was wearing his press vest, that clearly marked him as a journalist. He was gunned down and killed by Israeli snipers. Do you think he might have been shot *because* he was wearing his press vest, and the Israelis weren't crazy about there killing fields being broadcast around the world?

WAU: Yes. The Israelis are realizing that they can't continue to fool people indefinitely. This camera footage of all of this flies in the face of any claims that the Israeli army is acting in self defense. These on-the-ground images show Israeli propaganda for what it is.

DB: It appears they are willing to wipe out peaceful protesters while the rest of the world is watching, while the US government continues to provide them with arms, and while the Western corporate press works to bury the real story.

Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of *Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom*. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net. You can get in touch with the author at dbernstein@igc.org.

Beware of White Helmets Bearing News

The celebrated White Helmets of Oscar fame appeared to have made their own feature film in Duma on the night of the alleged chemical attack, as Ann Wright explains.

By Ann Wright

Special to Consortium News



At the center of the controversy over an alleged chemical attack in the Damascus suburb of Duma on April 7 are the White Helmets, a self-described rescue operation about whom an Oscar-winning documentary was made.

Reporter and author Max Blumenthal has [tracked](#) the role of the White Helmets in the Syrian conflict. He reported that the White Helmets were created in Turkey by James Le Mesurier, a former British MI5 agent. The group has received at

least \$55 million from the British Foreign Office and \$23 million from the U.S. Agency for International Development as well as millions from the Kingdom of Qatar, which has backed a variety of extremist groups in Syria including Al Qaeda.

Blumenthal writes, “When Defense Secretary James Mattis cited ‘social media’ in place of scientific evidence of a chemical attack in Duma, he was referring to video shot by members of the White Helmets. Similarly, when State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert sought to explain why the US bombed Syria before inspectors from the OPCW could produce a report from the ground, she claimed, ‘We have our own intelligence.’ With little else to offer, she was likely referring to social media material published by members of the White Helmets.”

The reference to social media as evidence in the most serious decision a leader can make—to engage in an act of war—is part of a disturbing trend. Then Secretary of State John Kerry pointed to “social media” as evidence of the Syrian government’s guilt in a 2013 chemical attack in the same Damascus suburb. But as Robert Parry, the late founder and editor of this site, pointed out in numerous reports, Syrian government guilt was far from a sure thing.

Rather than wait for the arrival of a team of experts from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to assess whether chemicals had even been used in this latest incident, Trump gave the order to bomb.

Gas!

The possible role of the White Helmets in the latest alleged chemical attack was first revealed by veteran Middle East reporter Robert Fisk, writing for *The Independent*. In “The Search for Truth in the Rubble of Douma-And One Doctor’s Doubts Over the Chemical Attacks,” Fisk reported that he tracked down 58-year-old Syrian doctor Assim Rahaibani.

The doctor told Fisk that he learned from fellow physicians who were on duty at the clinic the night of the attack. Rahaibani said patients were brought in by “jihadi gunmen of Jaish el-Islam [the Army of Islam]” in Duma and that the patients appeared to be “overcome not by gas but by oxygen starvation in the rubbish-filled tunnels and basements in which they lived, on a night of wind and heavy shelling that stirred up a dust storm.”

Rahaibani told Fisk, “I was with my family in the basement of my home three hundred metres from here on the night but all the doctors know what happened. There was a lot of shelling [by government forces] and aircraft were always over Duma at night – but on this night, there was wind and huge dust clouds began to come into the basements and cellars where people lived. People began to arrive

here suffering from hypoxia, oxygen loss.”

Rahaibani continued: “Then someone at the door, a ‘White Helmet,’ shouted ‘Gas!’, and a panic began. People started throwing water over each other. Yes, the video was filmed here, it is genuine, but what you see are people suffering from hypoxia – not gas poisoning.”

Fisk writes that, “There are the many people I talked to amid the ruins of the town who said they had ‘never believed in’ gas stories – which were usually put about, they claimed, by the armed Islamist groups. These particular jihadis survived under a blizzard of shellfire by living in other’s people’s homes and in vast, wide tunnels with underground roads carved through the living rock by prisoners with pick-axes on three levels beneath the town. I walked through three of them yesterday, vast corridors of living rock which still contained Russian – yes, Russian – rockets and burned-out cars.”

Significantly, Fisk reported that locals told him that White Helmets left with jihadists bused out of Duma in a deal made with the Syrian government and Russia, which provided security for the transfer.

Other Reports

Other reporters have corroborated what Fisk found. Reporter Pearson Sharp of One America News, a conservative Christian TV network and supporter of President Trump, interviewed doctors and witnesses at the clinic. They also said there was no chemical attack and that strangers came into the clinic and shouted “Gas!” and filmed the reaction.

RT’s Arabic service also tracked down an 11-year old boy filmed in the “attack,” and found him in completely good health and able to answer questions of the RT reporter. He told her he was with his mother when they were urged to enter the clinic. “We were outside,” the boy said, and they told all of us to go into the hospital. I was immediately taken upstairs, and they started pouring water on me.”

Ann Wright served 29 years in the US Army/Army Reserves and retired as a Colonel. She was also a US diplomat and was in US Embassies in Nicaragua, Grenada, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Sierra Leone, Micronesia, Afghanistan and Mongolia. She resigned from the US government in March 2003 in opposition to the lies the Bush administration was stating as the rationale for the invasion, occupation and destruction of Iraq. She is the co-author of “Dissent: Voices of Conscience.”

Wanted: The 'Butcher of Damascus' to Return Normalcy to Syria

Bashar al-Assad is just the latest in a long line of Middle East leaders demonized by colonial Britain and the U.S. for their independence, says Eric Margolis in this commentary.

By **Eric S. Margolis**



Butcher of Damascus. Gasser of children. Baby Killer of Syria. Tool of Moscow. Cruel despot. Monster.

These are all names the western media and politicians routinely heap on Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad. He has now become the top Mideast villain, the man we love to hate.

As a veteran Mideast watcher, I find all this hard to swallow. Compared to other brutal Mideast leaders, Assad is pretty weak tea. The U.S./British propaganda effort to paint Assad in blackest colors is having a difficult time.

Mideast leaders who toe the U.S. line and make nice to Israel are invariably called 'statesmen' or 'president' by the American government and its increasingly tame media. Their repression is conveniently downplayed.

Saudi rulers are reverently treated by despite leading the world in executions. Last year, 44 people were publicly beheaded. In some years, around 150 people have lost their heads in Saudi Arabia, often a quarter of them Pakistani guest workers. Having been arrested by the Saudi religious police, I can tell you that the kingdom is a police state with sand dunes and camels. Saudi vassal states Bahrain and the Emirates are better, but not much.

Morocco, a key U.S. ally, is notorious for its ghastly prisons and brutal torture. Iraq and Afghanistan, now under U.S. control, are even worse. Israel, the largest recipient of U.S. aid, holds close to 7,000 Palestinian political prisoners, among them 400 children, and is gunning down Palestinian demonstrators on the Gaza border.

Syria has always been a repressive police state. I recall watching 'spies' being hanged in front of my hotel. Its various police forces are notorious for brutality and torture. In fact, until recently, the U.S. actually sent captive

suspects to Syria to be tortured and jailed.

That was before Washington made the decision to overthrow Syria's legitimate government ('regime' in DC talk) as the first step in attacking Iran.

But Damascus was no worse a human rights abuser than Cairo, Amman, Rabat and Riyadh, all U.S. vassals.

While looking at the current western hate campaigns against Syria and Iran, keep in mind the history of the modern Mideast. We are again seeing the 1914 era lies from London about Belgian babies speared on German bayonets.

'Hitler on the Nile'

Any Arab or Iranian leader who sought an independent policy or refused the tutelage of London and then Washington was delegitimized, excoriated, and demonized. Remember the Iranian leader Mohammed Mossadegh overthrown in a CIA coup? The renowned Egyptian leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, whom the British branded 'Hitler on the Nile' and tried to assassinate? Or the late, murdered Libyan Muammar Khadafi, called 'Mad Dog of the Mideast' by President Ronald Reagan?

Imam Khomeini of Iran and President Ahmadinejad, both favored targets of western media invective, and both compared to the much overused Hitler. Saddam Hussein, the 'Butcher of Baghdad,' and that modern Dr Fu Manchu, Osama bin Laden, the all-time favorite Muslim arch villain.

Of course, there's nothing new in this nasty name-calling. During the Victorian Era, Britain's press demonized arch villains like 'the Mad Mullah,' the Mahdi, the Fakir of Ipi, and Nana Sahib of the 1857 Indian uprising against British imperial rule.

Bashar al-Assad was a mild-mannered ophthalmologist living in London with his British-born wife. When his rash elder brother Basil was killed in a car crash, Bashar was compelled to return to Syria and become the nominal political leader after the death of his very tough, ruthless father, Hafez al-Assad. Bashar's main role was mediating between powerful factions in Damascus and trying to modernize his nation (while managing the police state inherited from his father).

In 2011, the U.S., Britain, Israel and Saudi Arabia ignited an uprising in Syria using often fanatical jihadists. The shy, retiring Bashar was forced to become war leader in a ruthless civil conflict as his nation disintegrated.

President Trump, whose B-52 bombers are ravaging Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen

calls Assad a ‘monster.’ Some of his relatives are indeed ruthless. But very many Syrians think of Assad as their nation’s only hope of returning to normalcy.

Eric S. Margolis is an award-winning, internationally syndicated columnist and book author. His articles have appeared in the New York Times, the International Herald Tribune, Times of London, the Wall Street Journal, the Khaleej Times, Lew Rockwell and other news sites in the Middle East and Asia. He has appeared as an expert on foreign affairs on CNN, BBC, ABC, France 2, France 24, Al Jazeera, CTV, CBC, CCTV China His internet column is found at www.ericmargolis.com. He is author of two best-selling books “War at the Top of the World – The Struggle for Afghanistan and Asia” and “American Raj, How the U.S. Rules the Mideast”.

Embattled Palestinian Knesset Member Fights for Her People’s Rights

In this interview with Haneen Zoabi, a Palestinian member of the Israeli Knesset, Dennis J. Bernstein discusses Zoabi’s feminism, the struggle in Gaza and life in the Israeli parliament.

By Dennis J Bernstein



Haneen Zoabi is a member of the Israeli Knesset and the first woman elected to the Israeli Knesset on an Arab party list. She’s an unrelenting advocate for equal citizenship rights for the Palestinian citizens of Israel, and despite repeated attacks of all kinds, she remains unrelenting in her call for an end to Israel’s occupation of Palestinian Lands.

Zoabi considers herself a straight up feminist. She says “real feminism must acknowledge the discrimination against Arab women in Israel, and real feminism must know to identify with and struggle alongside them, at the national, civil and social levels.”

Zoabi joined forces with the Balad Party a year after it was founded in 1997. A key guiding principle of the Party is to maintain a one-third quota for women candidates. The party advocates for the rights of Palestinians, legally designated as ‘Arab Israelis’. Zoabi has been banned from the Knesset five times for taking strong stands in support of Palestinian rights.

Bernstein spoke to Haneen Zoabi on April 17th in Berkeley California at the

Flashpoints studios of Pacifica Radio/KPFA

Dennis Bernstein: We are honored to have in the studio a member of the Israeli Knesset, Haneen Zoabi. She tells me she has been suspended from that body five times but she is back again, trying to make lives more livable for Palestinians in the state of Israel. What went through your mind, Haneen Zoabi, when you got first-hand reports of the killings along the border fence?

Haneen Zoabi: Palestinians have long been suffering from the siege. Almost daily, bombers fly over Gaza. Israel wants to break the will of the Palestinians, to prevent Palestinians from fighting for their freedom. I would describe the Palestinian struggle as an heroic one. After eleven years of siege, 75% of children in Gaza suffer from anemia. Fisherman are shot on a weekly basis. Farmers coming to work on their land are shot. Employment rates and poverty rates are extremely high. 95% of the water is unsafe to drink. The United Nations has determined that the living situation in Gaza is not suitable for human life. But the Palestinian people do not want to die a silent, slow-motion death under the siege. If Israel is determined to kill them and continues to evade accountability for this crime, the Palestinians will die struggling for their liberation. This terrible, indiscriminate killing we are seeing now at the border is meant to deter others from struggling. This is the plan for Gaza: either to let it die slowly or to inflict more and more suffering, without breaking the silence concerning the siege. 70% of the inhabitants in Gaza are refugees Israeli expelled from their homes and villages in 1948. They want freedom and they want to return home.

DB: Some people have compared the lives of Arabs inside Israel with the lives of Blacks living under Jim Crow.

HZ: First of all, most people don't understand the meaning of being a Palestinian and being a citizen of Israel. First of all, we didn't choose to be Israelis. It was Israelis who immigrated to our homeland and established here a Jewish state. It was in order to be recognized in the UN that Israeli granted citizenship to those Palestinians who remained in their homeland. We who remained in historical Palestine continue to struggle for our people's rights—the right to return and an end to the occupation. Israel doesn't perceive us as citizens, they perceive us as obstacles to the Jewish state. The purpose of having a Jewish state is to give privileges to Jews at the expense of Palestinians. There are 95 racist laws on the books in Israel today. As a Knesset member, I have been suspended five times because of my political views and for speaking out against these racist laws.

DB: What sort of things got you suspended?

HZ: I participated in the Freedom Flotilla to break the siege of Gaza in 2010, when Israel killed nine Turkish activists in an act of piracy on international waters. For daring to be a part of this flotilla I was labeled a traitor. Since last year, Israel has now passed a new law which gives the Knesset the ability to permanently suspend any Knesset member. Our struggle for freedom and democracy clashes directly with the concept of a Jewish state. We cannot struggle for our equality within this construct.

DB: To be clear, you are calling for a one-state solution. For one person one vote.

HZ: I am calling for a state which represents all of its citizens. For Israel, this struggle for democracy is a strategic threat. Equality and justice are strategic threats. As a member of the Knesset, I am asked to be loyal to racism, loyal to apartheid laws, loyal to my oppressor. In Arab schools, we cannot study our own history, our own literature. We cannot control our own textbooks. We learn that we don't have any special relation to our homeland. We pay taxes so that our children can learn how inferior we are in our homeland. We must thank Israel every day for not expelling us in 1948. Citizenship in Israel is not something that is meant to empower us. In a poll conducted three or four years ago, 65% of Israelis said they would like to be perceived as part of the West and not as part of the Middle East. If you don't want to be seen as part of the Middle East, if you don't want to respect the history and the culture, why did you come here? You hate my language, you destroy over 500 villages and cities, develop over 700 cities and villages for the exclusive use of Jewish citizens. You came here without any respect for my identity or my history. You came not to live beside me but to replace me. Our response to this position is so democratic, so simple, so humanitarian: to decolonize the regime and to decolonize the people of Israel. It is not only a battle for equality, it is also a vision that frees the Israelis from their colonialist perceptions.

DB: Could you describe the relationship between Palestinians inside the state of Israel and those in the occupied West Bank and Gaza?

HZ: I am forbidden to travel to Gaza. Gaza is now the biggest ghetto in the world. They restrict the movement even of patients, even of students. In Gaza there are hundreds of women with cancer who cannot to be treated in the West Bank. It is not so uncommon that people with illnesses die waiting at checkpoints. As a politician, I don't see myself as just struggling for the rights of Palestinians within the borders of 1948. I am struggling for the rights of the Palestinian people.

DB: So your constituency includes all Palestinians.

HZ: One strategy of control at play here, apart from occupation and the siege, is citizenship as a way to tame and control Palestinians within Israel. I don't have the right to even identify myself as Palestinian in Israel. I must identify myself as Arab-Israeli. I must accept my dual marginalization: I am not 100% Palestinian and I am not 100% Israeli because I am not Jewish. It is not that we have a normal state occupying another state. We have a colonialist state which perceives me as an invader. Still today Israeli is confiscating our land. Already they have confiscated 85% of our land. Is it really the case that you need more? When I pose this question in the Knesset, the answer I get is: "We are a Jewish state and you are invaders." We must fight against the whole system, of which occupation is one part. Occupation is part of the Zionist ideology.

DB: What is your primary purpose in coming to the US at this time?

HZ: It is so important to speak directly to the American community. Israel could not continue its criminal policies against the Palestinians without the full support of the US government. We do not ask the Americans to like the Palestinians, nor do we ask them to love the Palestinians. We ask them to examine their sense of justice, equality and freedom. You cannot be a liberal without embracing the Palestinian cause. I meet US politicians who sympathize with our cause but explain that they may lose their positions if they support us openly. Washington politicians need to be liberated from the Zionist lobby if we are ever going to succeed at liberating ourselves.

DB: It is interesting that some of the strongest support for the Palestinian cause has come from those who fought against the apartheid regime in South Africa. They are saying that it is worse now in the occupied territories than it was in South Africa.

HZ: The Palestinian struggle is a struggle for justice. You cannot support justice in the world without supporting the Palestinian cause. And again, American citizens cannot see themselves as being neutral in this struggle, because of the total blind support of Israel by the United States. Israel is not held accountable for its crimes and this is why it is able to continue with this murderous oppression. It is time to send a clear message to Israel that it is not above international law.

Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of *Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom*. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net. You can get in touch with the author at dbernstein@igc.org.

'Worthy' and 'Unworthy' Victims

As the Friday demonstrations inside the border fence in Gaza picked up again today for the fourth week, Israeli security forces have already killed four more Palestinians, who in the eyes of the U.S. are “unworthy” victims, argues David William Pear.

By David William Pear



In their book Manufacturing Consent Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky distinguished between two kinds of victims: the worthy victims and the unworthy victims. The “worthy victims” are the victims (real and alleged) of leaders on the U.S. enemies list, such as Bashar al-Assad. The “unworthy victims” are those of the U.S. and its client states, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The U.S.-led alliance calling itself the “international community” is outraged when there are worthy victims. For example, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley holds up pictures in the Security Council of dead Syrian babies for the world to see. Worthy victims are granted human rights, and Assad deserves our outrage.

Unworthy victims for example are the 50,000 Yemeni children who have died of starvation because of Saudi Arabia’s blockade of Yemen, including food, water and medicine.

Unworthy victims are blamed for being victims and ignored by the international community and the mainstream media. Unworthy victims have no human rights. Yemen is a humanitarian disaster that is ignored. Saudi Arabia is a friend of the U.S. and Washington is helping the Saudi war effort with equipment and logistical support.

So there is no outrage from the U.S. when Saudi Arabia Crown Prince and defense minister Mohammad bin Salman drops U.S.- manufactured bombs from U.S.-made planes, which indiscriminately slaughter Yemeni men, women and children below. MBS is instead the darling of the neocons. Columnist Thomas Friedman praises him as if being an absolute monarch is the thing to be in the 21st century. Robert Parry, the late founder and editor of this site, described Friedman and the neocons as “disconnected from reality.”

Protesting for a Right to Return

For weeks now, tens of thousands of Gazans have been legally protesting for

their right to return to their homes in Palestine. There is no outrage in the U.S. when Netanyahu and his regime orders Israeli soldiers to massacre them. Hundreds of Palestinians were gunned down on Land Day and during demonstrations for the Right to Return. Four more have been killed today and hundreds more wounded in the fourth week of the protests. But Netanyahu has every reason to believe that the U.S. will protect him, as it has many times in the past. Nikki Haley is not going to hold up pictures of dead Palestinian children.

Instead she will shield Netanyahu from criticism, and accuse his critics of being anti-Semitic. Netanyahu's victims are unworthy victims. And in what appears to be a major shift in U.S. foreign policy towards Israel and the Palestinians, the latest US State Department annual human rights report released today no longer labels the occupied Palestinian West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza, as "Occupied Territories," the accurate legal term, as it had previously, reports the Institute for Middle East Understanding.

The Palestinians that have been shot dead in Gaza were inside the Israeli enclosure that has been their prison for over a decade. They were on Palestinian land. They presented no danger to the Israeli soldiers that were on the Israeli side of the barricade. The soldiers had telescopic sights on their rifles and fired from a distance of over 100 yards away. Hundreds of Palestinians were shot with illegal fragmentation bullets that have been banned by the 1899 Hague Declaration.

Netanyahu's orders were illegal and the soldiers followed illegal orders. The Nuremberg Trials declared that "just following orders" is not a defense against war crimes.

Two million Palestinian refugees have been trapped in Gaza for over a decade. Gaza has become an inhumane, open-air prison. Even former Tory Prime Minister David Cameron called it that.

The people in Gaza have been cut off from the outside world. Israel controls everything and anything that goes in or out. What goes in is barely enough food for Gazans to survive. Netanyahu joked once he put Gaza on a diet. The sick, wounded and dying are not allowed to get out of Gaza to go to a hospital for medical treatment without Israeli permission. Netanyahu rarely gives that permission. Netanyahu's victims are unworthy victims and are blamed for being victims.

Total Blockade—an Act of War

In 2006 Israel tightened the noose around Gaza by imposing a total blockade by air, land and sea. The supposed crime for which Israel imposed an illegal

collective punishment on Gazans is that they democratically elected the wrong government, against Israel's wishes. Instead of electing the Israeli controlled Palestinian National Liberation Movement, known as Fatah, Gazans elected the Islamic Resistance Movement, known as Hamas.

Israel used to consider Fatah a terrorist organization, but now it does not because they are collaborators. Instead Israel, which secretly backed the formation of Hamas in a divide and conquer strategy, calls Hamas terrorists. Netanyahu then falsely brands the demonstrators terrorists.

Israel has killed and wounded journalists reporting from Gaza. They are unworthy victims too. So there's no outcry from the mainstream media. Instead it repeatedly accuses Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, of (allegedly) killing journalists. Then there is a huge outcry because they are worthy victims.

The U.S. has imposed economic sanctions on Russia. Israel gets billions of dollars in U.S. financial aid every year, regardless of what Netanyahu does.

Putin is accused of invading Crimea when Russian troops were already legally deployed there and Crimeans voted in a referendum to rejoin their historical attachment to Russia. Putin is vilified for (allegedly) meddling in U.S. politics. Netanyahu gets standing ovations from joint sessions of Congress.

The Israeli prime minister has been illegally occupying the West Bank of Palestine, and he is building more illegal Israeli colonies there, euphemistically called settlements. Meanwhile, Netanyahu thumbs his nose at international law. The U.S. has vetoed 43 U.N. Security Council resolutions against Israel. Haley fumes that Putin is an obstructionist for vetoing a U.N. resolution condemning Assad for an alleged chemical weapons attack, even before any investigation was begun. The U.S. tried to block an investigation by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) of the alleged chemical weapon attack site in Syria. The OPCW says it will investigate anyway.

The Supreme Law of the Land

President Trump's order to attack Syria based on an alleged use of chemical weapons is a violation of international law. The U.S. is not the international policeman, judge and executioner. Article 2, section 4 of the U.N. Charter states:

"All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations."

The only legal uses of force according to the U.N. Charter are for self-defense

and when force is authorized by the U.N. Security Council. Violations of the U.N. Charter are also a violation of the U.S. Constitution under Article VI which states:

“...all treaties made, or which shall be made, under the authority of the United States, shall be the supreme law of the land.”

The U.N. Charter is a treaty that was signed by the President of the United States and ratified by the U.S. Senate. Under the U.S. Constitution the U.N. Charter is the “supreme law of the land” in the U.S., as well as internationally.

Under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights everyone has a presumption of innocence until proven guilty before a court of law. The U.S. does not have the right to declare a sentence before there is a trial and verdict. Article 66 of the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which the U.S. has refused to join, entitles those accused of crimes the “presumption of innocence” and further says:

“The onus is on the Prosecutor to prove the guilt of the accused. In order to convict the accused, the Court must be convinced of the guilt of the accused beyond reasonable doubt.”

We do not even know if a crime has been committed in Duma. There is considerable reason for doubt. Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh and others (Robert Fisk, Ron Paul, Jeffrey Sachs, former U.K. ambassador to Syria Peter Ford, Fox News Tucker Carlson, Larry Wilkerson, etc.) have raised serious doubts about the alleged chemical weapons attack by Assad.

The unproven allegation of chemical weapons comes from U.S. backed terrorists that have been waging a war against the Syrian people for over seven years. The terrorists have been reported to have chemical weapons in their arsenal. If chemical weapons were used in any of the attacks they could have come from the terrorists themselves.

It is well known that the U.S. has been behind the war against Assad, and that the U.S. admittedly is backing terrorists in a U.S. regime change project. The dead and wounded of U.S. aggression during the 21st century number in the millions of people in over half a dozen countries. The mainstream media ignores the magnitude of the wars of U.S. aggression, and the U.S. people mainly go about their day-to-day activities as if nothing is happening.

Since the U.S. is allegedly a democracy and has freedom of the press, then U.S. citizens and the U.S. mainstream media are responsible for the actions of their

government. Ignorance of the law about what their government is doing is not an excuse.

Palestinian Rights

Under international law the Palestinians have a right to resist the illegal military occupation of Palestine that has been going on since 1967. But Israel does not have the right to impose collective punishment, deny refugees the right to return home, to confiscate land, impose indefinite detention, torture prisoners and restrict the free movement of civilians; nor to confine them in inhumane living conditions in Gaza. Israel has systematically destroyed their homes and civilian infrastructure.

Israel routinely shoots to kill anyone or anything entering a “no man’s land” buffer zone inside Gaza. It even has remote controlled machine guns and other indiscriminant instruments of death within the buffer zone. When tens of thousands of unarmed demonstrators approached the buffer zone, the Israeli military snipers were prepared to massacre them. And Netanyahu says Israel has the most moral army in the world.

The demonstrations in commemoration of Land Day and protests for the Right to Return have been announced in advance, including today’s. The Israeli human rights organization *B’Tselem* on April 3 called on Israeli soldiers to refuse illegal orders to shoot unarmed civilians saying:

“The use of live ammunition against unarmed persons who pose no danger to anyone is unlawful. It is even more blatantly unlawful in the case of soldiers firing from a great distance at demonstrators located on the other side of the fence that separates Israel from the Gaza Strip. In addition, it is impermissible to order soldiers to fire live ammunition at individuals for approaching the fence, damaging it, or attempting to cross it.”

Under international law commanders giving the orders to shoot unarmed civilians and individual soldiers who do so could be charged with wars crimes by the International Criminal Court. That is not likely to happen anytime soon because the U.S. protects Israel and allows Netanyahu to literally get away with murder. Netanyahu’s victims are unworthy.

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David William Pear is an activist and progressive columnist writing on economic, political and social issues. He is a member of Veterans for Peace, Saint Pete for Peace, CodePink, and International Solidarity Movement. In 2016 he spent 10 weeks in Palestine with the Palestinian lead non-violent resistance group International Solidarity Movement. In November of 2015 he was a delegate with

CodePink to Palestine to show solidarity with Palestinians. David returned to Palestine for 10 days in March 2018. He can be contacted at dwpear521@gmail.com.

Of Animals and Monsters and Missiles over Damascus

It seems to be very difficult to be the leader of a state, particularly a strong and/or ideologically driven leader, and not end up a “monster,” muses Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson



President Donald Trump ordered the bombing of selective targets in the Syrian capital, Damascus last Friday night. He did so because he was emotionally upset by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's *alleged* use of chemical weapons against civilians in the town of Douma – the last rebel (ISIS-style) stronghold adjacent to the capital.

Just prior to Trump's actualizing his emotions by throwing missiles into Damascus, he had expressed his opinion (and keep in mind that there is no difference between fact and opinion for Trump) that President Assad is a “monster” as well as an “animal.” This was at least in part because the Syrian President stooped to “killing his own people.” The problem with all this is (1) Trump has no hard evidence that Assad was behind the alleged gas attack and (2) killing your own people is, unfortunately, what civil wars are all about.

Alas, the world has always been, and still is, full of “monsters” and “animals.” And, since we are throwing around such epithets, we might as well give a couple of close-to-home examples of those qualifying behaviors.

– How about the invasion of a nation along with the subsequent killing of at least half a million people, all based on “false and overstated intelligence”? That is what the “monster” and “animal” President George W. Bush did back in 2003 in Iraq.

–How about lining up a 100 “sharpshooters” at a border for what seems to be the almost gleeful act of repeatedly shooting down unarmed protesters? That is what the “monster” and “animal” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been doing at Israel's border with Gaza during the month of April 2018.

We can go on citing examples such as these – all about the “monsters” and

“animals” in power in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar and, at one time or other, just about every other nation. Donald Trump himself, with his racist tendencies and impulsive behavior, is also a very good candidate for wearing the epithets he assigns to others.



A lesson learned from this endless list is that it seems to be very difficult to be the leader of a state, particularly a strong and/or ideologically driven leader, and not end up a “monster.” It is not only the power that rests in the leader’s hands, but also the corrupting organizational pressures and expectations to use that power that create the slippery slope to abuse. Even those who come to office with relatively decent reputations, such as in the case of the U.S., Jimmy Carter and Barack Obama, end up with bloody hands.

Minions

However, the problem does not end there. After all, the “monster” must have his or her minions. Albert Einstein once said that “the pioneers of a warless world are the youth that refuse military service.” More recently, the Israeli human rights organization B’ tselem has called on Israeli soldiers “to refuse orders to open fire on Palestinian protesters in the Gaza Strip.” These public positions have made no a noticeable difference. The massive violence continues.

Human violence might have something to do with our evolutionary history, but why should this inclination be so readily indulged? After all, just because we are evolutionarily inclined in a certain way doesn’t mean that we can’t exercise a modicum of self-control. And indeed, a good number of folks do go through life in a relatively non-violent fashion. Yet, put just about any of us in a rotten barrel and we turn bad.

Part of the problem might be that our cultures and institutions infantilize too many of us. By this I mean that from infancy through old age we are taught to follow orders and go along with the group. As children we are taught to obey our parents, then our teachers. When, as teens we (at least in the West) begin to break away from parental control, we more often than not replace parental guidance with that of our peer group. Then, on to a career, where a new set of rules and expectations is imposed. Of course, there is sociological logic to all of this. We could have no societal structure and stability without a certain level of rules and obedience to them. However, there is a price. The price at the state level may be seen in terms of all too often unquestioning loyalty, patriotism and solidarity that leads the average citizen to simply follow the leader, and thereby participate in the violence the state has declared as necessary.

“Monsters” like George W. Bush, Benjamin Netanyahu and now Donald Trump do not actually pull the triggers. Someone else does on their orders – someone trained to obey. Actually “someone” is misleading. It is not one. It is millions. Military establishments are the most obvious environments where this follow the leader cum infantilization takes place. Put into a military organization, the citizen is back in that childhood environment where he or she is expected to just obey. There may be specified situations where one does not have to obey, but they are so rare and so strongly counterbalanced by peer pressure that they almost never come into play. Thus, in the military, all soldiers of whatever rank are infantilized relative to their superiors: told to shoot, they shoot; told to fire the missile, they fire it; told to drop the bomb, they drop it; and told to guide the weaponized drone onto a target half a world away (oops! It turns out to be a wedding party) they guide it.

There is no ready solution to any of this. The number of people who will refuse military orders, as suggested by Einstein, or refuse to shoot protesters, as suggested by B’tselem, is much too few to stop the mayhem. Our proclivity to violence has been institutionalized and our fundamental societal need to maintain group cohesion has been perverted by the those who claim to be our leaders. It is something of a vicious circle – or maybe just an eternal Catch 22.

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Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of [Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America’s National Interest](#); [America’s Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood](#); and [Islamic Fundamentalism](#). He blogs at www.tothepointanalyses.com.

War Fever

There is a fever that seizes this land from time to time and it is the fever of war, a condition that this time seems immune to all known cures, starting with reason, as Daniel Lazare explores.

By **Daniel Lazare** *Special to Consortium News*



What happens when an unthinkable war meets an unbeatable case of war fever? Thanks to Russia-gate, unsubstantiated reports about the use of poison gas in Syria, and a slew of similar factoids and pseudo-scandals, the world may soon find out.

In saner times, including during the Cold War at even its most heated, political leaders knew not to push a conflict with a rival nuclear power too far. After all, what was the point of getting into a fight in which everyone would lose?

Cooler heads thus prevailed in Washington while more excitable sorts were shipped off to where they could do no harm. This is what kept the peace during the U-2 affair, the Berlin Wall, and the Cuban missile crisis and what promised to continue doing so even after the advent of American “unipolarity” in 1989-92.

But that was then. Today, the question is no longer how to avoid a fight that can only lead to catastrophe, but how to avoid a showdown with a country that “in the past four years has annexed Crimea, intervened in eastern Ukraine, sought to influence the American election in 2016, allegedly poisoned a former Russian spy living in Britain and propped up the murderous government of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria,” to quote the bill of indictment in a recent front-page [article](#) in *The New York Times*.

Given that the list of alleged atrocities expands with virtually each passing week, the answer, increasingly, is: no way, no how. Since Russia is bent on spreading “conflict and discord” throughout the west – if only in the eyes of the U.S., that is – confrontation grows more and more likely.

A Very American Coup

This is despite the fact that the offenses cited by the *Times*

are each more complex or dubious than the “newspaper of record” is willing to concede. The annexation of the Crimea, for instance, was a response to a US-

financed, neo-Nazi-spearheaded coup in Kiev in February 2014 that caused the rickety Ukrainian state to collapse and sent Russophones in the east fleeing for protection into the arms of Moscow. After investing more than \$5 billion to steer the Ukraine in such a disastrous direction according to then-Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, the US blamed Russia for the consequences. (See quote beginning at [7:42](#).) As for charges of interference in the 2016 election, the *Times* itself noted back in January 2017 that the formal CIA-FBI-NSA “assessment” blaming the Kremlin was notably bereft of factual back-up. As the paper [put it](#):

“[T]he declassified report contained no information about how the agencies had collected their data or had come to their conclusions. So it is bound to be attacked by skeptics and by partisans of Mr. Trump, who see the review as a political effort to impugn the legitimacy of his election.”

Quite right. But now evidence-free assertions are accepted as fact while anyone who says otherwise is ignored or shouted down. Questions linger with regard to the March 4 poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal, most notably why a supposedly ultra-powerful nerve agent would not take effect for more than seven hours. (Someone supposedly smeared the nerve agent on [the front door of Sergei’s home](#) in Salisbury, England, which he and his daughter left around nine in the morning. Yet it was not until 4:15 p.m. that they were found incapacitated on a park bench after visiting a pub and eating at a local restaurant.)

As for “the murderous government of President Bashar al-Assad,” such talk would be silly if the consequences weren’t so dire. After all, it wasn’t Assad who flooded Syria with tens of thousands of jihadis bent on massacring Christian, Druse, Alawites, and secularists. To the contrary, it was the U.S., Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the other Arab Gulf states. As a now declassified Defense Intelligence Agency [report](#) noted back in August 2012:

- “The Salafist[s], the Muslim Brotherhood, and AQI [i.e. Al Qaeda in Iraq] are the major forces driving the insurgency”;
- “The West, Gulf countries, and Turkey support the [rebel] opposition”;
- “If the situation unravels further, there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist principality in eastern Syria”;
- “...[T]his is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition [i.e. the US, Turkey, and the gulf states] want in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of the Shia expansion...”

A Sectarian War

In other words, the US and its Sunni Arab allies launched a sectarian war against the Alawite-backed Syrian regime with the full knowledge that an Al Qaeda state in eastern Syria might well be the result. Yet now they blame Assad for defending himself against the Salafist onslaught and Russia for helping him. It is a case of launching a neo-medieval sectarian war and then crying foul when the other side dares to fight back.

One would think that cooler heads might inject a note of sanity before things get completely out of hand. But the opposite seems to be the case. The more temperatures rise, the more congressmen, journalists, think-tank experts, and other hangers-on conclude that it is advantageous to jump on the bandwagon and drive passions up even more. Pro-war frenzy leads to more of the same. The more reason is needed, the scarcer it becomes.

Indeed, it sometimes seems that the only halfway sane person left in Washington is Donald Trump, who, according to [a strange report](#) in Sunday's *Washington Post*, is fighting a desperate rear-guard action against neocons bent on ratcheting up tensions to ever higher levels.

Reporters Greg Jaffe, John Hudson, and Philip Rucker described a bizarre scene at Trump's Mar-a-Lago Florida resort last month in which aides were only able to persuade the president to expel sixty Russian diplomats in retaliation for the Skripal poisoning by promising him that allies would toss out an equal number in Europe. When France and Germany only expelled four Russians each, Trump felt double-crossed. "I don't care about the total," he reportedly screamed when the aides tried to explain that the number expelled by all European nations would eventually approach the U.S. figure. "There were curse words," one official told the *Post*, "a lot of curse words."

Similarly, when Congress approved a new round of anti-Russian sanctions in July, the article says it took aides four days to persuade Trump to sign the bill even though it had cleared with a veto-proof majority that made it a virtual *fait accompli*. The *Post* said the same thing occurred when aides tried to convince him to sell antitank missiles to the Ukraine for use against pro-Russian separatists. "Why is this our problem?" he reportedly asked. "Why not let the Europeans deal with Ukraine?" When CIA Director Mike Pompeo, UN Ambassador Nikki Haley, and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis added their voices to the chorus, all the president could do was whine, "I just want peace."

Everyone Agreed—Except Trump

Of course, when Donald Trump is the sole remaining voice of reason, then we're really in trouble. The infighting escalated even further on Monday after Haley vowed to slap still more sanctions on Russia for the crime of backing

Assad. “They have done nothing but brutalize their people and destroy their land, all in the name of power,” she [said](#) of the Baathists on CBS News’s “Face the Nation.” So Russia would have to pay the price.

Everyone agreed, Republicans, Democrats, and the corporate media – everyone, that is, except Trump. Defying his neocon captors, he undercut Haley by declaring that sanctions would not be forthcoming after all. White House spokesperson Sarah Huckabee Sanders was left to gamely [assert](#) that “the president has been clear that he’s going to be tough on Russia, but at the same time he’d still like to have a good relationship with them.”

Times columnist Michelle Goldberg was so flabbergasted by Trump’s about-face that she [wondered](#) whether reports that Putin was using a secret “pee tape” to force him into line might not be true after all.

But of course – who else would want an end to hostilities with Russia other than a crazy man or someone under duress? War with a nuclear power is something that no sane person really wants to avoid, right?

U.S. foreign policy is caught in a powerful contradiction. A military showdown with a fellow nuclear power is unthinkable. Yet pausing for a moment to consider where all this madness is leading is out of the question. Two forces are colliding, war on one hand and a general inability to think things through in a clear-headed way on the other.

It’s a case of a herd of independent minds stampeding over a cliff – not because someone is forcing them to, but because they don’t know how to stop.

Daniel Lazare is the author of *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace, 1996) and other books about American politics. He has written for a wide variety of publications from *The Nation* to *Le Monde Diplomatique*, and his articles about the Middle East, terrorism, Eastern Europe, and other topics appear regularly on such websites as *Jacobin* and *The American Conservative*.

Four Lessons From the Strike on Syria

The lessons from last weekend’s strike on Syria by the United States of America and two of its allies do not bode well for the future of democracy or the future of peace, says Inder Comar.

By Inder Comar



Lessons from the U.S. strike on Syria reveal uncomfortable truths about the current state of international affairs.

But they must be confronted, and dealt with, in order to create a better future.

Here are four lessons to take from the Syria strike:

Lesson One: Dictatorial Power

The Syria strike underscores that the powers of the Presidency, in matters of foreign affairs, are now those of a dictator.

President Trump, like his forebears, swept aside tepid concern that Congress had to weigh in on the legitimacy of any strike against a foreign power.

Instead, and like his predecessors, the President has taken a broad, Caesar-like view of his powers, marshaling American military might as a unitary actor, without any scrutiny.

The most that a few senators and members of Congress could do in the run up to the attack was raise tepid, half-hearted questions over Twitter about the need for Congress to authorize an act of war, as the Constitution says.

That members of the most powerful legislative body in the world could do nothing other than tweet in the face of missile strikes speaks for itself.

As noted in "the Saleh v. Bush case", the Judiciary will not scrutinize executive conduct, either, because the President is presumed as acting in the best interests of the nation – even when committing heinous international crimes.

The Legislative and the Judicial branches have walked away from their constitutional roles, and are declining any mandate to oversee the Executive branch in matters of war.

Checks and balances are swept away. And the strike now sets further precedent for unilateral executive authority to attack or invade another country based. It is one person, and one person alone, who commands American military might, without scrutiny or later accountability.

Lesson Two: Death of Collective Security

The Syria strike underscored that the United Nations system of collective security is at death's door, and perhaps never coming back.



The U.N. suffered a critical blow to its legitimacy in 2003 because of the U.S. invasion of Iraq without Security Council authorization or evidence that the U.S. acted in self-defense under Article 51 of the U.N. Charter.

But the Syria strike further advances the perception that the U.N. has lost its role as a neutral, honest broker.

Smaller countries are realizing they are nakedly at the whim of the great powers. Bolivian president Evo Morales, in perhaps the strongest critique of the strikes to date (other than from Russia), warned that the United States is now the greatest threat to democracy in the world today.

It seems that like the League of Nations, the U.N. can only stand by as the storms of war gather.

The world is one attack away from a destructive, global war that could spread far beyond the borders of Syria or the Middle East.

Lesson Three: Bi-Partisan Perpetual War



The Syria strike affirms the American two-party consensus that perpetual war, and perpetual imperialism, is the open and intended purpose of American government and economic institutions.

Media outlets, concentrated by a handful of corporate owners, understand and exploit the perverse incentives that make war profitable, and they cheer on a war because it sells viewers to advertisers.

The revolving door in Washington D.C. means that government officials go on to lucrative consulting and think-tank jobs, where they research and advise the next generation of government leaders on how to promote imperialism abroad.

Tellingly, the voices questioning the Syria strike came from a minority wing of both parties. Perpetual war is the bipartisan consensus.

Lesson Four: Spiritual Crisis

There is a grave political, cultural and spiritual crisis in the United States today.

War has eaten at the country's soul and left Americans deprived of a consistent sense of ethics.

In any other country, an attack on another country would be a matter of grave concern, with protests threatening a ruling party in a parliamentary system.

But in the United States, where attacks are common in a presidential system, another bout of militarism is absorbed with the morning coffee.

Hannah Arendt spoke of the banality of evil; she would write today about the banality of militarism, and the neutering of American public conscience.

The U.S. could be a tremendous source of good if it could change its ways and act as a real leader in building meaningful peace, environmental sustainability, and economic opportunity.

But there are almost no prominent voices advocating a peacetime economy and an end to imperialism. There are few influential voices with the imagination to think of something other than empire.

Inder Comar is the executive director of Just Atonement Inc., a legal non-profit dedicated to building peace and sustainability, and Managing Partner of Comar LLP, a private law firm working in technology. He is a recognized expert on the crime of aggression, the legality of the Iraq War, and international human rights. He holds a law degree from the New York University School of Law, and a B.A. and Master of Arts degree from Stanford University.
