

# Living in a World Bereft of Privacy

As Edward Snowden confirmed beyond doubt, we live in a world where our most intimate moments can be seen by would-be extortioners and, more alarmingly, by our governments, says Annie Machon.

**By Annie Machon  
in Brussels**

*Special to Consortium News*



A few days ago I first received a menacing email from someone calling herself Susana Peritz. She told me “she” had hacked my email, planted malware on my computer, and had then filmed me getting my jollies while watching “interesting” porn online. Her email had caught my attention because it mentioned in the subject line a very old password, attached to a very old email address I had not used for over a decade. The malware must have been planted on a defunct computer.

Putting aside the fact that I am far more concerned about GCHQ or the NSA hacking my computer (as should we all be), this did rather amuse me.

Apparently, I must pay this “Susana” \$1000 via Bitcoin or, shock, have my alleged pleasures shared with my acquaintances. And just last night I received another courteous request for cash from someone calling themselves Jillie Abdulrazak, but the price has now been inflated to \$3000.

Why am I not concerned? Well, I can safely say – hand on heart – that I have never watched online porn. But this got me thinking about how or why I could have been singled out for this mark of a blackmailer’s esteem, and that brings me on to some rather dark thoughts.

It is perfectly possible that a rare, unguarded moment of long-distance online love might have been captured (but by whom?). That would probably be over a decade ago and would certainly have been using the old email account which was attached to the particular password at the time.

However, even those memories have been denied me – I distinctly remember that I have been too paranoid for too long and have always covered the built-in computer camera lens. Anything that could possibly have been recorded could only be audio – a saucy phone call at most. There can be no video of my younger self, alas.

I have had good reason to be paranoid. In the late 1990s I supported my former partner and fellow MI5 intelligence officer, David Shalyer, in his whistleblower

exploits to expose the crimes and incompetence of the UK spy agencies at the time. This resulted in us literally going on the run across Europe, living in hiding for a year in *la France profonde*, and another two years in exile in Paris before he voluntarily returned to the UK in 2000 to face the music and inevitably, under the terms of the UK' draconian 1989 Official Secrets Act, being sent to prison for exposing the crimes of British spies.

From those years, knowing what we knew about the spies' capabilities even then, the sense of being always potentially watched has never rubbed off.

### The Bigger Picture



So, knowing absolutely that I have never watched any online porn and that I always keep my computer camera lens covered, "Susana" and "Jillie" can go whistle. You have tried to shake down the wrong paranoid ex-MI5 whistleblower, darlings. And my tech people are now hunting you.

Any possible audio could, I suppose, be spliced in some way to some dodgy video to make this the stuff of a blackmailer's dreams. That, surely, will be easy to "forensicate" – and indeed I have other friends who can do this, at world class level.

Alternatively, the former love at the time could have recorded the audio for his

own nefarious personal usage for some nebulous time in the future. And if that future is now, after he had shown himself a long time ago to be chronically dishonest, why do this in 2018 when we have been separated for years?

He may have possibly continued to use the old email account himself to watch vile material – he certainly had the password back then and perhaps he uses it to distance himself from his own porn habit (fapware, as the geeks call it)? If that is the case, he is even less honorable than I had considered him to be.

Or perhaps this is some type of dark LoveInt operation by the spooks, in some failed attempt to frighten or embarrass me?

But there is, of course, a bigger, more political picture.

Ever since I worked as an intelligence officer for MI5, before going on the run with Shayler during the whistleblowing years in the late 1990s, I have been painfully aware of the tech capabilities of the spies. Even back then we knew that computers could be captured by adversaries and turned against you – keystroke loggers, remote recording via microphones, cameras switched on to watch you, and many other horrors.

The whistleblowing of Edward Snowden back in 2013 has confirmed all this and more on an industrial, global scale – we are all potentially at risk of this particular invasion of our personal privacy. I have kept my computer and mobile camera lenses covered for all these years precisely because of this threat.

One specific Snowden disclosure, which has received little mainstream media traction, was a programme called OPTIC NERVE. This was a GCHQ program (funded by American money) that allowed the spooks to intercept in real time video conferencing calls. It turned out, horror, that 10 percent of them were of a salacious nature, and the spooks were shocked!

I have spoken about privacy and surveillance at conferences around the world and have many, many times had to debate the supposition that “if you are doing nothing wrong, you have nothing to hide.”

However, most people would like to keep their intimate relationships private. In this era of work travel and long distance relationships, more of us might well have intimate conversations and even video play via the internet. In an adult, consensual and mutually pleasurable context, we are doing nothing wrong and we have nothing to hide, but we surely don't want the spooks to be watching us or listening in, any more than we would want the criminals capturing images and trying to shake us down for money.

This low-level and laughably amateur attempt at extortion is risible.

Unfortunately, the threat from our governments spying on us all is not.

**Annie Machon is a former intelligence officer in the UK's domestic MI5 Security Service.**

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## Letter from Britain—Lost in a Brexit Maze: a Baffled Political Class Dreads the Prospect of Jeremy Corbyn

The British Establishment wants to protect the expanded privileges it inherited from Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal legacy but appears clueless about how to deal with an increasingly rebellious British public, as Alexander Mercouris explains.

**By Alexander Mercouris**  
**in London**

*Special to Consortium News*



Donald Trump's recent trip to Britain – happening against the backdrop of the sweltering heat of an unusually protracted summer heatwave – took place at a time when Britain's political system is closer to breakdown than at any time in my memory.

The immediate crisis centres on a Brexit plan which British Prime Minister Theresa May unveiled to her top ministers at a closed meeting at Chequers (the British Prime Minister's official country residence) earlier this month.

It is fair to say this plan (two years in the making and details still to be worked out), which proposes a relationship between Britain and the EU similar to those agreed by Ukraine and Moldova, satisfies no-one.

The hardline Brexiteers, who account for a significant minority of the elected members of Parliament (MPs) of May's Conservative Party and an overwhelming majority of the Conservative Party's membership and supporters in the country, are unhappy because they are not getting the clear break from the EU which they expected and which they believed they had been promised after Leave won the 2016 referendum.

Opponents of Brexit, made up of the overwhelming majority of opposition Labour Party MPs and its membership, as well as a small number of Conservative MPs, the bulk of the civil service, the business community and the labour unions basically don't want Brexit to happen and want Britain to remain in the EU. They are unhappy because despite the continued connection to the EU Britain would still be leaving the EU.

As for the EU itself, it has remained uncharacteristically quiet since the plan was published, but its senior officials have made clear they will probably reject it because it crosses too many of its red lines.

How did Britain – two years after the question of Britain's exit from the EU appeared to have been answered in the June 2016 referendum – end up with such a plan, and how does that connect to the broader political crisis which is underway in Britain today?

### How It Came to Pass



In order to answer that question a good place to start is to look at the Brexit referendum itself, and how it came to pass, and how contrary to all expectations May became British Prime Minister immediately following it.

The key point to make about the Brexit referendum is that it would never have been called if there had been any genuine belief (or fear) within Britain's

political class that it would result in a vote for Britain to leave the EU.

David Cameron – the British Conservative Prime Minister who called the referendum – did so not to settle what he believed as a burning debate in Britain, but in order to outflank his critics within the Conservative Party and in the country, who were using his supposed loyalty to the EU as a political stick to beat him with.

Cameron himself – along with the rest of the British establishment – assumed however that the greater part of the British public was bored and indifferent to the question of Britain's EU membership (Cameron once spoke of the need for the Conservative Party "to stop banging on about Europe"). Accordingly he assumed that once the referendum was called his critics would be quickly exposed as obsessive and marginal figures, out of touch with public opinion.

However, Boris Johnson, a former mayor of London had emerged as an important rival to Cameron for the leadership of the Conservative Party, and who after much agonising joined the Leave Europe campaign because he thought that doing so would position him better for a future leadership bid.

These essentially frivolous reasons for Cameron's and Johnson's actions before and during the referendum illustrate the chronic amateurism of much of Britain's political class, especially that part of it which is associated with the Conservative Party—where high political office more often than not depends on wealth and social status than on experience or ability.

Both Cameron and Johnson are in fact typical members of Britain's political and social elite. Both were born to wealth, and both of them were educated at Eton College and Oxford University, where as it happens both men belonged to the same social club, albeit at different times.

Eton College and Oxford University happen to be the two most famous educational institutions within the inordinately expensive and socially exclusive private educational system which trains Britain's establishment. Access to both is effectively barred for cost reasons to the overwhelming majority of Britain's population. However admission to them – especially to Eton College – acts as a passport to high office for those members of the elite who want it.

### **Complete Misjudgment**

In the event, and not for the last time, the referendum result showed that Cameron, Johnson and the rest of the British establishment had completely misjudged the views and attitudes of the British population.

Instead of being bored and indifferent to the subject of Europe, British voters

turned out to vote in what are by today's standards high numbers (turnout was 72.2%, significantly higher than in recent general elections). More to the point, instead of (as expected) voting to stay in the EU they voted – albeit by a small margin of 52-48% – to leave.

The immediate result was the political establishment went through the political equivalent of a nervous breakdown. Cameron – overwhelmed by forces he had unleashed but barely understood, and not knowing what to do next – broke a promise he had given previously to stay irrespective of the referendum and resigned immediately. Johnson, equally unsure what to do in a situation he had never anticipated or prepared for, in turn bungled his own leadership bid, and failed to replace Cameron.

The result was that the post of British Prime Minister passed by default to May, a colourless and unimaginative administrator, whose lack of even the most basic political skills became cruelly exposed during the general election she called completely unnecessarily last year, which she nearly lost.

Since becoming Prime Minister, May – as might be expected of such a person – has approached the question of Brexit as an essentially technical question, to be ironed out in negotiations, with the overarching objective being to cause as little disruption to the British economy as possible so that things can continue to go on as before.

Inevitably that is an approach which favours keeping as much of the status quo as possible, with May looking to achieve a Brexit which retains Britain's economic and trading links with the EU essentially unaffected.

### **Rejection of an Intolerable Status Quo**

The result is a 98-page proposal for an association agreement between Britain and the EU, directly copied from those agreed with the EU by Moldova and Ukraine, whereby Britain would remain in fact, though not in name, a member of the European Single Market. Its economy would observe the EU's regulatory structure as administered by the European Court of Justice, whose decisions on regulatory questions would continue to be binding on British companies.

Unsurprisingly this 'solution', which would leave Britain indefinitely subject to EU-made laws, in the making of which it would no longer have any say, satisfies nobody, and is being criticised by all sides.

The latest opinion poll shows that only 25% of Britons now think May is managing the negotiations with the EU successfully.

It would be a fundamental error however to see May as the cause of what

practically everyone in Britain now agrees is a debacle. If May were the only problem, there would be no problem getting rid of her and replacing her with someone else. The fact that May is still there despite her all too obvious flaws and failures illustrates the underlying point: the problem is not May; it is Britain's entire political class.

A proper response to the Brexit vote would have recognised that whatever it was, it was a rejection of the status quo, which has obviously become intolerable to much of the British public. Any response to the Brexit vote, which – like May's plan – seeks to preserve the status quo, is therefore by definition flawed.

The British political class, once renowned for its sure-footedness and flexibility, would once have had no difficulty recognising this fact, unwelcome though it was. It would accordingly have focused its energy on responding to the Brexit vote in the way desired by the majority of British voters, by considering what part of the status quo has become objectionable and how it can be changed.

The focus would not have been on the negotiations, which by definition can only be a means to an end, but on formulating a plan to take Britain forward once it was outside the EU whilst responding to the concerns of the British public..

That would have required a thorough study of the state of Britain's society and economy, leading to what might have been a heated but real debate about what was needed to be changed. Eventually, after a period of acrimony and argument, a programme to prepare Britain for life outside the EU would have emerged and a negotiating position could have been formed around it, which could have been presented to the EU in the negotiations.

There is no of course guarantee the EU would have agreed to whatever the British proposed, but at least a proper discussion would have happened followed by a real negotiation between two equal partners, with the British knowing their own minds and having a set of clear goals which they would have been working towards. If the negotiations were unsuccessful the British would then have been free to put their plans into effect by themselves, with steps taken in advance to prepare for that contingency.

### **No Debate**

In the event nothing like that has happened. There has been no debate within the British establishment either about the state of Britain or about what needs to be done to change it. Nor have any serious steps been taken to prepare for the possibility that the negotiations with the EU might be unsuccessful.

The reason for that is that taking a close, hard look at the state of Britain's society and economy and working out a programme of reform to adjust them to the

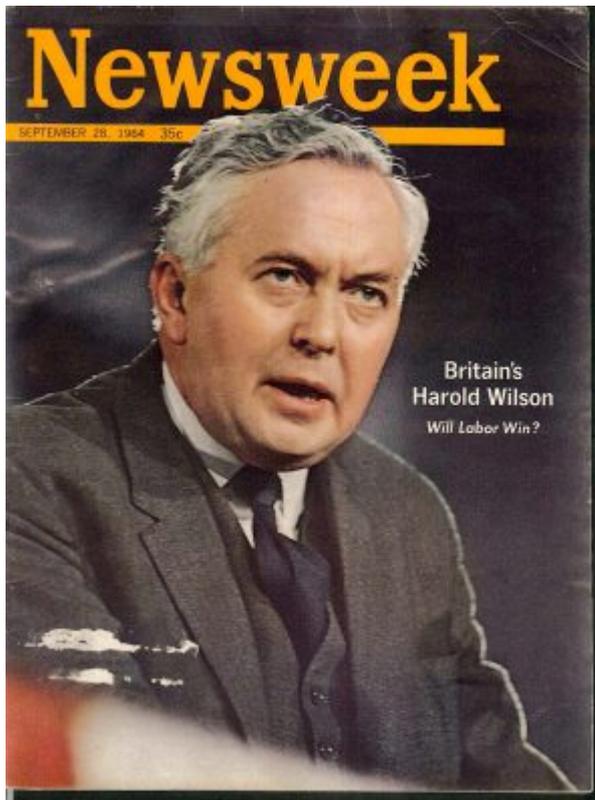
world after Brexit is something that Britain's establishment is today both unable and unwilling to do. As beneficiaries of the 1980s Thatcherite settlement they want things to remain as they are, and have no wish or idea of how to change them. Besides, it is doubtful whether they any longer have either the technical skill or the experience, or even the self-confidence to meet such a challenge.

The result is that instead of the genuine debate that needs to happen about what sort of country Britain needs to be, there has been a sterile debate between supporters of 'soft Brexit', which it is now clear boils down to May's proposed association agreement with the EU, and 'hard Brexit', with advocates of the latter talking grandly about a clean break with the EU and about trading with the EU on World Trade Organisation terms, but without having much idea of what that means in practice.

In such a situation it becomes easier to understand why despite her failures, May remains Prime Minister. In a vacuum of ideas a Prime Minister without ideas appears to suit the situation.

In reality, outside the establishment, there is no shortage in Britain today of ideas about how to take the country forward.

The individual who has come to crystallise for many people the challenge to the status quo is Jeremy Corbyn, the veteran left wing politician who leads the Labour Party. He not only very visibly bested May in last year's general election, but most certainly does have a set of ideas for taking Britain forward.



Corbyn is one of the most misrepresented figures in British politics. By the standards of earlier Labour politicians he is by no means radical. His desire for a mixed economy, with significant sections brought back into public ownership and certain elements of planning reintroduced, and his support for strong social services and for high investment in state funded education and health care are all to be paid for through progressive taxation. His longstanding opposition to military adventures overseas, as well, all fall squarely within what was once the British Labour Party's social democratic mainstream.

At any time up to the 1980s Corbyn's current policy positions (as opposed to some of the positions he once held in his youth) would not have been considered controversial in Labour terms. On the contrary they represent a return to the policies followed in Britain's social democratic heyday by the previous Labour governments of Clement Attlee and Harold Wilson.

Even Corbyn's well known support for extra Parliamentary political activity, which many of his critics profess to see as somehow dangerous and 'extreme', is actually in Labour Party terms completely traditional. The Labour Party after all is itself the product of extra Parliamentary political activity, having been formed at the start of the twentieth century by Britain's labour unions and by various voluntary societies operating outside Parliament. Indeed for most of its history the Labour Party spoke of itself as the "political wing" of a "Labour movement" whose "industrial wing" was the labour unions.

### **Clinging to Class Interests**

The difficulty is that though Corbyn's social democratic programme does indeed offer an alternative to the Thatcherite settlement, which in Britain represents the status quo, and is a conceivable programme around which to prepare Britain for life outside the EU, it is also one which is completely unacceptable to Britain's establishment.

Ever since the 1990s the establishment has not only accepted the 1980s Thatcher neoliberal settlement, but has massively benefitted from it to the point where

in the public mind it is increasingly associated with it. The idea that it could be successfully challenged was until recently, for the establishment, literally unthinkable since that would have meant acknowledging that the status and power of the establishment itself could be challenged.

That is why until the 2017 election the establishment – which to be clear includes the entire parliamentary faction of the Labour Party and the media – found it impossible to take Corbyn seriously. It is also why Corbyn is the target of such extreme establishment hostility, including from within his own party.

As a result of the outcome of the 2017 election, which showed that Corbyn's programme is actually popular – especially amongst Britons of working age and younger– came as a shock. It was for the establishment at least as great a shock as that of the Brexit referendum of the year before.

Not only was the election outcome horrifying to them in itself, but it also – like the result of the Brexit referendum – further underscored the extent to which the establishment has lost ground with the public.

It is that sense of disconnection which gives the political crisis in Britain its peculiar character. An establishment which senses itself challenged and which is no longer sure of its support in the country is afraid to risk the traditional method in Britain of resolving a political crisis, which is another general election. Indeed it is now so insecure about its position that it is nervous of taking any step at all, such as replacing a Prime Minister who is discredited and unpopular.

### **Different Than the Nineties**

The situation differs fundamentally from the one in the early 1990s, when another Conservative government had become unpopular. Though the Conservatives at that time were divided and unpopular, the part of the British establishment associated with the Labour Party was brimming with self-confidence, and was both eager and able to take charge. Since it too was fully committed to preserving the 1980s Thatcher settlement, an election did not threaten fundamental change or challenge the position of the establishment in the way that an election might do now.

The result is an impasse, with the establishment – including sections of the Labour Party – desperate at almost any cost to avoid an election and the attendant risk of a Corbyn government, but incapable of formulating an alternative path forward.

The nature of the crisis is elegantly summed up in the following words of an

article in *The Guardian*, quoting the comments of a senior Conservative MP.

A senior Tory backbencher on the 1922 committee executive said on Thursday that May had the “best chief whip ever” and that he would still save her. “He is called Jeremy Corbyn. Just mention the threat of a Corbyn government and our people come into line.”

The reality is that political logic clearly points to the need for a Corbyn government. Given that Corbyn is the only leader who is offering a way forward, a government led by him is the only way to restore a sense of direction and coherence. Resisting that logic is simply deepening the crisis and creating more drift. One senses that government has all but broken down, with only administrative tasks still being performed, as senior ministers plot and war against each other, without however having any overarching idea of what they want to do.

Whether a Corbyn government, if it were elected, would be able to implement its programme in the face of the immense opposition it would face is another matter. Corbyn has so far repeatedly defied predictions by overcoming every obstacle in his path. Whether as Prime Minister he would be able to go on doing so is a question only the future can tell.

What is beyond doubt however is that a Corbyn government must be tried. The alternative is that the crisis becomes entrenched and deepens, in which case other, altogether more alarming forces might start to emerge. Already what looks like the early signs of this are there.

Gramsci put it best: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”

In Britain – as any reader of British newspapers knows – the “morbid symptoms” are currently there in abundance.

**Alexander Mercouris is a political commentator and editor of The Duran.**

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# GOP and Corporate Dems Gain When Democrats Run Against Putin

Hammering on Russia is a losing strategy for progressives as most Americans care about economic issues and it is the Republicans and corporate Democrats who stand to gain, argues Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon



Progressives should figure it out. Amplifying the anti-Russia din helps to drown out the left's core messages for economic fairness, equal rights, environmental protection, diplomacy and so much more. Echoing the racket of blaming Russia for the USA's severe shortages of democracy plays into the hands of Republicans and corporate Democrats eager to block progressive momentum.

When riding on the "Russiagate" bandwagon, progressives unwittingly aid political forces that are eager to sideline progressive messages. And with the midterm elections now scarcely 100 days away, the torrents of hyperbolic and hypocritical claims about Russia keep diverting attention from why it's so important to defeat Republicans.

As a practical matter, devoting massive amounts of time and resources to focusing on Russia has reduced capacities to effectively challenge the domestic forces that are assaulting democratic possibilities at home – with such tactics as state voter ID laws, purging of voter rolls, and numerous barriers to suppress turnout by people of color.

Instead of keeping eyes on the prize, some of the Democratic base has been watching and trusting media outlets like MSNBC. An extreme Russia obsession at the network has left precious little airtime to expose and challenge the vast quantity of terrible domestic-policy measures being advanced by the Trump administration every day.

Likewise with the U.S. government's militarism. While some Democrats and Republicans in Congress have put forward legislation to end the active U.S. role in Saudi Arabia's mass-murderous war on Yemen, those efforts face a steeper uphill climb because of MSNBC.

This week, under the headline "It's Been Over a Year Since MSNBC Has Mentioned U.S. War in Yemen," journalist Adam Johnson reported for the media watchdog group FAIR about the collapse of journalistic decency at MSNBC, under the weight of the network's Russia Russia Russia obsession. Johnson's article asks a big-type question: "Why is the No. 1 outlet of alleged anti-Trump #resistance

completely ignoring his most devastating war?”

The FAIR report says: “What seems most likely is MSNBC has found that attacking Russia from the right on matters of foreign policy is the most elegant way to preserve its ‘progressive’ image while still serving traditional centers of power – namely, the Democratic Party establishment, corporate sponsors, and their own revolving door of ex-spook and military contractor-funded talking heads.”

### **Russia Doesn't Concern Americans**

Corporate media have been exerting enormous pressure on Democratic officeholders and candidates to follow a thin blue party line on Russia. Yet polling shows that few Americans see Russia as a threat to their well-being; they're far more concerned about such matters as healthcare, education, housing and overall economic security.

The gap between most Americans and media elites is clear in a nationwide poll taken after the Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki, which was fiercely condemned by the punditocracy. As *The Hill* newspaper reported this week under the headline “Most Americans Back Trump's Call for Follow-Up Summit With Putin,” 54 percent of respondents favored plans for a second summit. “The survey also found that 61 percent of Americans say better relations with Russia are in the best interest of the United States.”

Yet most Democratic Party leaders have very different priorities. After investing so much political capital in portraying Putin's government as an implacable enemy of the United States, top Democrats on Capitol Hill are hardly inclined to help thaw relations between the world's two nuclear superpowers.

It would be easy for news watchers to see that the Democratic Party is much more committed to a hard line against Russia than a hard line against the corporate forces imposing extreme economic inequality here at home.

National polling underscores just how out of whack and out of touch the party's top dogs are. Last month, the Gallup organization asked: “What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?” The results were telling. “Situation with Russia” came in at below one-half of 1 percent.

The day after the Helsinki summit, *The Washington Post* reported: “Citing polls and focus groups that have put Trump and Russia far down the list of voter priorities, Democratic strategists have counseled candidates and party leaders for months to discuss ‘kitchen table’ issues. Now, after a remarkable 46-minute news conference on foreign soil where Trump stood side by side with a former KGB agent to praise his ‘strong’ denials of election interference and criticize the

FBI, those strategists believe the ground may have shifted.”

Prominent corporate Democrats who want to beat back the current progressive groundswell inside their party are leading the charge. Jim Kessler, a senior vice president at the “centrist” Third Way organization, was quick to proclaim after the summit: “It got simple real fast. I’ve talked to a lot of Democrats that are running in purple and red states and districts who have said that Russia rarely comes up back home, and I think that has now changed.”

The Democratic National Committee and other official arms of the party keep sending out Russia-bashing emails to millions of people on a nearly daily basis. At times the goals seem to involve generating and exploiting manic panic.

At the end of last week, as soon as the White House announced plans (later postponed) for Vladimir Putin to meet with President Trump in Washington this fall, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee fired off a mass email – from “RUSSIA ALERT (via DCCC)” – declaring that the Russian president “must NOT be allowed to set foot in our country.” The email strained to conflate a summit with Russian interference in U.S. elections. “We cannot overstate how dangerous this is,” the DCCC gravely warned. And: “We need to stop him at all costs.”

For Democrats who move in elite circles, running against Putin might seem like a smart election move. But for voters worried about economic insecurity and many other social ills, a political party obsessed with Russia is likely to seem aloof and irrelevant to their lives.

**Norman Solomon is the national coordinator of the online activist group RootsAction.org and the executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. He is the author of a dozen books including “War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death.”**

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## The Gray Lady Thinks Twice About Assange’s Prosecution

Though *The New York Times* itself has not reported it, it’s No. 2 lawyer told a group of judges that the prosecution of Julian Assange could have dire consequences for the *Times* itself, explains Ray McGovern.

**By Ray McGovern**

*Special to Consortium News*



Well, lordy be. A lawyer for *The New York Times* has figured out that prosecuting WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange might gore the ox of *The Gray Lady* herself.

The *Times*'s deputy general counsel, David McCraw, told a group of judges on the West Coast on Tuesday that such prosecution would be a gut punch to free speech, according to Maria Dinzeo, writing for the *Courthouse News Service*.

Curiously, as of this writing, McCraw's words have found no mention in the *Times* itself. In recent years, the newspaper has shown a marked proclivity to avoid printing anything that might risk its front row seat at the government trough.

Stating the obvious, McCraw noted that the "prosecution of him [Assange] would be a very, very bad precedent for publishers ... he's sort of in a classic publisher's position and I think the law would have a very hard time drawing a distinction between *The New York Times* and WikiLeaks."

That's because, for one thing, the *Times* itself published many stories based on classified information revealed by WikiLeaks and other sources. The paper decisively turned against Assange once WikiLeaks published the DNC and Podesta emails.

More broadly, no journalist in America since John Peter Zenger in Colonial days has been indicted or imprisoned for their work. Unless American prosecutors could prove that Assange personally took part in the theft of classified material or someone's emails, rather than just receiving and publishing them, prosecuting him merely for his publications would be a first since the British Governor General of New York, William Cosby, imprisoned Zenger in 1734 for ten months for printing articles critical of Cosby. Zenger was acquitted by a jury because what he had printed was proven to be factual—a claim WikiLeaks can also make.

McCraw went on to emphasize that, "Assange should be afforded the same protections as a traditional journalist." The *Times* lawyer avoided criticizing what the United Nations has branded – twice – the "arbitrary detention" of Assange and his incommunicado, solitary confinement-like situation in the Ecuador embassy in London since March. Multiple reports indicate the new government of Ecuador will evict Assange into the hands of British police.

These days we need to be thankful for small favors. It's nice to know the *Times* now considers Assange a journalist, even though it did not spring to his

defense when he was being widely branded a “high-tech terrorist” – as can be seen here in my very last appearance on CNN’s domestic broadcast almost eight years ago.

Mike Pompeo, when he was CIA director, called WikiLeaks a “non-state, hostile intelligence service,” and Assange’s lawyers believe there is already a sealed indictment against him in the state of Virginia. Assange fears that if he is arrested on flimsy bail skipping charges he will be extradited to the United States.

### **Is the Fourth Estate Dead?**

Ten years ago I contended that The Gray Lady – like the rest of the Fourth Estate – was moribund. More recently, I have been saying it is dead. I now stand corrected. Rumors of its death have been exaggerated. But how does one characterize its current state?

Let me borrow a memorable phrase from philosopher Billy Crystal, playing Miracle Max in “The Princess Bride,” while trying to bring the character Wesley back to life. He is just “mostly dead,” Chrystal insisted.

And so it is with today’s corporate media, with a tiny chance, now that *The New York Times*, watching out for its own equities, might help Assange avoid prosecution for practicing journalism. Actually, he has been accused so far of no crime of any kind.

Eight years ago, when the Sam Adams Associates for Integrity gave Assange its annual award, the Fourth Estate was a bit more than just a distant memory. So we attempted to put his award in historical perspective. Below is the text of the citation presented to Assange, together with the traditional SAAI corner-brightener candlestick holder, by former UK Ambassador Craig Murray (himself an SAAI laureate) and Daniel Ellsberg.

### **Sam Adams Associates Award**

*Julian Assange*





It seems altogether fitting and proper that this year's award be presented in London, where Edmund Burke coined the expression "Fourth Estate."

Comparing the function of the press to that of the three Houses then in Parliament, Burke said:

"...but in the Reporters Gallery yonder, there sits a Fourth Estate more important far than they all."

The year was 1787—the year the U.S. Constitution was adopted. The First Amendment, approved four years later, aimed at ensuring that the press would be free of government interference. That was then.

With the Fourth Estate now on life support, there is a high premium on the fledgling Fifth Estate, which uses the ether and is not susceptible of government or corporation control. Small wonder that governments with lots to hide feel very threatened.

It has been said: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." WikiLeaks is helping make that possible by publishing documents that do not lie.

Last spring, when we chose WikiLeaks and Julian Assange for this award, Julian said he would accept only "on behalf of our sources, without which WikiLeaks' contributions are of no significance."

We do not know if Pvt. Bradley Manning gave WikiLeaks the gun-barrel video of July 12, 2007 called "Collateral Murder." Whoever did provide that graphic footage, showing the brutality of the celebrated "surge" in Iraq, was certainly far more a patriot than the "mainstream" journalist embedded in that same Army unit. He suppressed what happened in Baghdad that day, dismissed it as simply "one bad day in a surge that was filled with such days," and then had the temerity to lavish praise on the unit in a book he called "The Good Soldiers."

Julian is right to emphasize that the world is deeply indebted to patriotic truth-tellers like the sources who provided the gun-barrel footage and the many documents on Afghanistan and Iraq to WikiLeaks. We hope to have a chance to honor them in person in the future.

Today we honor WikiLeaks, and one of its leaders, Julian Assange, for their ingenuity in creating a new highway by which important documentary evidence can make its way, quickly and confidentially, through the ether and into our in-boxes. Long live the Fifth Estate!

*Presented this 23rd day of October 2010 in London, England by admirers of the example set by former CIA analyst, Sam Adams*

**Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He was an Army infantry/intelligence officer and then a CIA analyst for a total of 30 years. He is co-founder of Sam Adams Associates for Integrity in Intelligence.**

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## Catalonian Quest for Independence is Undeterred

In an interview with Consortium News, an independence leader and member of the Spanish parliament tells Attilio Moro that Catalonians are not finished seeking separation from Madrid.

**By Attilio Moro  
in Barcelona**

*Special to Consortium News*



“Freedom for the political prisoners,” read banners hanging on hundreds of balconies from Placa Catalunya to La Ramblas, and from the Vila de Gracia to the Gothic Quarter. They were calling for freedom for the many grass roots activists demanding independence from Spain who were arrested. And for the freedom of Charles Puigdemont, the ex-President of Generalitat de Catalunya, who was arrested in March by German authorities. A German judge rejected Spain’s extradition request on July 19. He would face rebellion and sedition charges if he returned to

Spain.

Puigdemont had escaped to Belgium the day after the independence referendum on October 1, 2017 with Spanish police on his heels. Madrid's secret service agents then hid a GPS tracker on the car he was traveling in from Helsinki, where he had attended a conference, back to Brussels. He is now in Hamburg, under surveillance by the German police.

Eight ministers of the dissolved Catalanian government (vice-president Junqueras, Joseph Rull, Dolores Bassa, Meri Borrás, Joaquim Forn, Charles Mund, Jordi Torull, Raul Romeva) are all being held in a Madrid prison, under accusation of having threatened the integrity of Spain. Seven independence leaders and intellectuals escaped to Scotland and Holland to avoid arrest.

No weapons or violence were used when these leaders organized the overwhelmingly successful independence referendum, which Madrid argued violated the Spanish constitution. The arrests were made to prevent the referendum from being implemented.

Earlier this month at the headquarters of the Partit Democrata, one of the two big independence Catalan parties, I met Sergi Miquel, an independence leader and member of the national parliament.

"My generation had never seen these kind of measures being taken, we thought they belonged to the past, to the Franco era," he told me. "But all of this is happening instead today in Spain, in Europe: democratically elected MPs and governors being arrested and detained for political reasons. The sentence will come in autumn. They risk up to thirty years in prison."

I asked Miquel whether the new Spanish minority government of Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez will be more willing to compromise than the former prime minister, Mariano Rajoy.

"In two years time there will be fresh elections in Spain, and none of the political parties will even talk to us, in order not to lose the Spanish voters who are against us," Miquel said. "Our leaders may even receive an exemplary punishment. Much will depend on Europe: the EU should stop turning a blind eye to this flagrant violation of democracy and human rights happening in its territory."

On July 9 Sanchez and Quim Torra, Catalonia's premier who took over from Puigdemont, met in Madrid, trying to revive dialogue. They agreed to restart meetings after seven years between Spanish and Catalanian ministers. And they discussed the possibility of jointly commemorating the terrorist attack in Barcelona last August. But Sanchez was adamantly against Catalonia holding a new

independence referendum.

### **'Independence Awaits'**

I asked Miquel what can be done in the meantime for the Catalan prisoners. "Unfortunately not much," he said. "Since last March the families of the prisoners have been given just one days' travel to see their relatives for 45 minutes in a Madrid prison. We ask – and humanitarian organizations should join us – that they at least be transferred to a prison in Barcelona. Of course we hope for an amnesty, since no serious crime has been committed. We hope that the new government, after next election, will be formed by the Socialist Party and the political group least hostile to us, Podemos."

Miquel did not rule out the Catalonian government organizing a new referendum on independence, despite the arrests, and the violent crackdown against voters the first time. "We can suffer losses and drawbacks, but our path is set," he said.

Miquel said even seeking more autonomy from Madrid, at least in the short term, would be difficult.

"We would be ready," he said. "But the Spanish government will not concede this. On the contrary, they are slowly eroding the little autonomy we managed to achieve over the past 50 years. The Basques today are much more autonomous than us. We want our right to self-determination to be recognized in Spain and Europe. We know that the process will be long and complex. We will have to confront other difficulties, arrests and rights violations. But we know that at the end of our path, independence awaits."

**Attilio Moro is a veteran Italian journalist who was a correspondent for the daily *Il Giorno* from New York and worked earlier in both radio (Italia Radio) and TV. He has travelled extensively, covering the first Iraq war, the first elections in Cambodia and South Africa, and has reported from Pakistan, Lebanon, Jordan and several Latin American countries, including Cuba, Ecuador and Argentina. Presently he is a correspondent on European affairs based in Brussels.**

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# The World According to Ben Rhodes: Hypocrisy in Obama's Foreign Policy

In a new book Obama's deputy national security adviser opens up about Pentagon interference in policy, Obama's political calculations and his own ignorance of the Middle East, as As'ad AbuKhalil explains in this review.

**By As'ad AbuKhalil**

*Special to Consortium News*



Ben Rhodes' interesting new book, *The World as It is: A Memoir of the Obama White House* (Random House), should be widely read not because of the wisdom or moral message it contains but because it is an unintended, damning account of liberal imperialism.

The book suffers from an acute case of self-congratulation, sanctimoniousness and hubris. The author situates himself (along with Samantha Power and the young Foreign Service officers who worked in the Obama White House) among the liberal advocates of foreign policy. He does not include Obama in this group, and the latter comes across—despite perfunctory praise—as he really is: an unprincipled politician who unfailingly subordinates moral arguments to political calculations. When, for example, Rhodes brings up the issue of a “democratic opening” in Myanmar, Obama quipped: “no one cares about Burma in Ohio” (p. 174).

This response reminds one of the famous retort Harry Truman gave to his disregard for the Arab perspective in his handling of the creation of the Jewish occupation state in 1948.

The rise of Rhodes to become a key national security advisor to Obama is rather surprising. He was educated in English literature and creative writing, and does not have any training in foreign policy or Middle East studies. But Rhodes worked for (former representative) Lee Hamilton at the Wilson Center, and that propelled him to the foreign policy-making world as he was a key writer of the Iraq Study Group's report.

But as a speech writer for Obama, one strains to remember any memorable speech that he wrote, and Obama's best—according to press accounts—speeches (like those timid speeches on racial issues, which always fell short of outright condemnation of white racism) were actually written by Obama himself. Rhodes is no Ted Sorensen or Bob Shrum, yet he enjoys listening to and reproducing his own words.

The liberal imperialist stance reminds one, paradoxically, of the stance of neo-

conservatives: both use lofty ideals to marshal arguments for imperialist military intervention and hegemony in the affairs of other nations. Rhodes is so oblivious to the racism underpinning the liberal Western stance, that he assumes that human rights and morality is the thrust of his policy choices and those of his ilk. There is more than a tinge of racism in his treatment and references to Arabs, and his unabashed Zionism does not deviate from the traditional Zionist outright contempt for the Arab people.

Of all the reasons that Arabs had to revolt against cruel and oppressive regimes (the overwhelming majority of which are sponsored and armed by the U.S.—a small detail that is missing from this hefty book), Rhodes actually believes that it was Obama's speech in Cairo, (as if it is even remembered by Arabs except to mock its promises and its condescending hectoring to Arab people about the Arab-Israeli question and the need for Arabs to accommodate themselves to Israeli occupation and aggression) which inspired Arabs to undertake the various Arab uprisings in what has become—offensively—known as “the Arab spring.”

And of course a native informant is always available to legitimize the contemptuous views by the White Man: he cites the authority of a “Palestinian-American woman whom I knew casually” (p. 60) to support his claim that Obama's Cairo speech prompted Arabs to revolt, as if they had no reasons of their own. At least it was nice of Rhodes to admit that it was the U.S. government which handpicked the audience for the Cairo speech.(p. 59)

### **Ardent Zionism**

Like all American officials who work on the Middle East, Rhodes (by his own admission) is an ardent Zionist who owns up to his past membership in AIPAC (p. 146). He considers U.S. support for Israeli occupation and aggression as the byproduct of “natural affinity for Israel” felt by “most Americans” (p. 57). But this foreign policy expert—by chance—fails to explain why the majority of public opinion in countries of the world—including in Western Europe—feels a natural affinity for the Palestinian people.

The discussion of U.S. policies toward the Arab-Israeli conflict within any U.S. administration is really an intimate debate among hardcore Zionists to see who can outdo the others in advancing the interests of Israeli occupation. Rhodes reports how Rahm Emanuel would refer to him as “ Hamas ” (p. 56) when he did not think Rhodes was being sufficiently supportive of Israeli interests. This passes as an internal debate about the best options for U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

The book reveals more about the domineering role of AIPAC on all decisions undertaken by the Obama administration about the Middle East. Obama had to brief

Netanyahu about the Iran nuclear deal before he briefed Congress, for instance.

The falsehood of the author's human rights position is revealed by his references to Arab regimes. His ostensibly passionate concern for the victims of repression seems to be confined to Syria and Libya—conveniently the only Arab regimes not aligned with the U.S. government, although Muammar Qadhafi was a dictator honored by all Western governments in his last years in power. Hillary Clinton met and praised the head of his secret police while she was Secretary of State (not mentioned by Rhodes, obviously).

The book talks at length about the so-called "Arab Spring", but there is not a word about Bahrain or Yemen (or Jordan or Morocco). The pro-U.S. dictatorships (which are the bulk of Arab regimes) are not mentioned at all in this book which leaves the reader with the impression that the entire Arab world was living in democratic bliss with the exception of Syria and Libya. Rhodes, even as a key staffer on the National Security Council, has yet to learn about the uprising in Bahrain. But noticing it would expose his hypocrisy and the moralistic inconsistency of the Obama's White House.

Rhodes only mentions the suffering of the Egyptian people after it became clear that Hosni Mubarak could no longer cling to power. He says that key Obama administration officials, including Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden, argued in favor of bolstering Mubarak. Obama—as Rhodes recounts—was not as enthusiastic because Obama was not friends with Mubarak as he was the Jordanian despot, King Abdullah.

According to Rhodes, Former CIA director John Brennan was explicit in his belief that Arabs were "not ready for democracy" (p. 106). Rhodes' bias in only expressing opposition to despots (and even elected leaders such as Yasser Arafat) who are not aligned with the U.S. becomes transparent when he describes a tour he made of a Saddam Hussein palace.

"There was still on display gifts that Saddam had received from admirers like Yasser Arafat and Muammar Gaddafi," Rhodes writes. As is widely known by people who know the region—the author excluded—Arafat never gave expensive or precious gifts to world leaders. He was known in fact to only give small replicas of Jerusalem or the Aqsa Mosque. Gaddafi's relationship with Saddam was often frosty. Surely, the author should have noted that those who were far more generous in showering Saddam with precious and valuable items were pro-U.S. despots, such Gulf monarchs and Jordan's King Husayn, whose friendship with Saddam was legendary, and whose son, the current King of Jordan, was one of Saddam's son `Uday Husayn's closest friends.

That Rhodes didn't know this indicates political bias. But then again, maybe

U.S. occupation soldiers (or local Iraqi cronies) looted the expensive gifts in the wake of the U.S. invasion and left behind the cheaper gifts from Arafat and Qadhdhafi.

### **Investment in Dictatorship**

Rhodes even makes an argument in favor of U.S. support for dictatorship (although he dares not name the dictators). He euphemistically calls such U.S. support "investment." And he believes that the "return" on such investment is "worth it, even if we occasionally suffer losses, embarrassments, and moral compromises". (p. 45). His boss came to office with an unapologetic, imperialist view of the world and with distrust of the liberation capacities of people in developing countries lacking "mature institutions" (p. 47). It is the same, old argument of past colonial powers.

One learns from this book that the U.S. military, since at least Sep. 11, now makes key political decisions that are constitutionally part of the powers of the civilian commander-in-chief. Presidents, especially Democratic presidents who are always perceived to be soft on war and defense, feel compelled to follow the wishes of the generals when it comes to troop deployment or redeployment. (p. 74) The military often leaks to the press its displeasure about presidential decisions or inclinations to force the hand of the president, as they did in the case of Obama and the increase in the number of troops in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the intelligence agencies offer opinions and revisions to Obama's draft speeches. (p. 50)

Rhodes' and Obama's ignorance of Arab affairs is on display throughout the book. Here is their theory of the underlying causes of tensions between the U.S. and world Muslims: that Muslims have been quite unhappy with "a McDonald's down the street and American pop culture on their television." (p. 53). Both men would be quite surprised that Muslims do enjoy meals—available even with Halal meat for those who are sticklers about religious rules—at McDonalds.

Rhodes' ardent Zionism permeates the pages. He even admits that during the preparation for a major campaign speech for Obama he recommended "going easy on Israeli settlements" (p. 55). Worse, Rhodes (the humane liberal) urged Obama to avoid even using the word "occupation" in reference to...Israeli occupation. (p. 58). In other words, Rhodes holds the same position held by Trump's current ambassador in occupied Jerusalem.

The author seems to cover up at least part of Israel's role in making U.S. Middle East policy. He talks about the Saudi king urging Obama to support Mubarak (he reveals that the king compared Egyptian protesters against Mubarak to Al-Qa'idah, Hizbullah, and Hamas (p. 102)), but Rhodes does not mention

Netanyahu in the same vein (his role on Egypt was reported at the time by *The New York Times* and other U.S. media). In fact, there is more than a tinge of ethnic disparagement in his references to Palestine and Palestinians.

While noting that Netanyahu sat in the Oval Office and lectured Obama on the Israeli position on the “peace process”, Rhodes says he “was familiar with the emotions” of the Israeli leader. He reports matter-of-factly about the “heroic Israel of the 1960s and 1970s”—presumably referring to Israeli wars of aggression, attacks on Palestinian refugee camps, and the bombing of schools and civilians in Egypt during the War of Attrition.

Rhodes reproduces verbatim the Zionist and racist myths about Israel: “Jews building a nation in the dessert, fighting off Arab armies, led by towering figures like Golda Meir, who seemed both indefatigable and profoundly just.”(p. 145) Rhodes is still ignorant of the industriousness and farming energies of the Palestinian people throughout history, and he still operates under the discarded—and since academically discredited—clichés of classical Zionism. He does not know that his “just” Golda Meir ordered bombing of refugee camps and presided over an occupation state.

Furthermore, in describing the Palestinian territories, Rhodes makes that racist distinction (which has been regurgitated since the days of Herzl) between Europeanized Jews (as if Sephardim Jews don’t count) and the inferior Arabs. Rhodes writes: “Israel from the air resembles southern Europe; the settlements looked like subdivisions in the Nevada desert; the Palestinian towns looked shabby and choked off.” (p. 201). Rhodes also accepts Israel’s “security concerns” (p. 201) (which have historically served as justifications for wars and massacres), and attribute them to “a history of anti-Semitism that continues to the current day”—and not to the resistance against occupation. Does that mean that successive Israeli invasions of Lebanon and the various massacres in Palestinian towns and refugee camps was an attempt by Israel to eradicate anti-Semitism?

### **Hypocrisy on Syria**

But the true nature of the hypocrisy of liberal interventionists of the Obama administration appears in Rhodes’ treatment of the Syrian war. Here, he pats himself on the back, repeatedly, because he consistently urged a U.S. war in Syria with a more muscular support for Syrian rebel groups—without much regard to their ideologies.

Shockingly, Rhodes appears as an advocate for al-Nusra (the official branch of Al-Qa`idah in Syria), as David Petraeus was, and admits he was “against those who wanted to designate part of the Syrian opposition—al-Nusra—as a terrorist

organization. Al Nusrah was probably the strongest fighting force within the opposition, and while there are extremist elements in the group, it was also clear that the more moderate opposition was fighting side by side with al Nusrah. I argued that labeling al Nusrah as terrorists would alienate the same people we wanted to help, while giving al Nusrah less incentive to avoid extremist affiliations," he writes on p. 197.

One would be curious to see the reactions of families and friends of Sep. 11 survivors to this callous passage by a senior official of the Obama administration (who was recently hired by Obama in his retirement). This foreign policy expert is making an argument that there are moderates and extremists within an organization which sprang from Bin Laden's movement and which continues to pledge allegiance to Bin Laden and his ideology. Rhodes even harbors hopes that this Syrian branch of Al-Qa'idah can be steered in a moderate direction.

This book serves as an indictment of the liberal interventionists in the Obama administration. Those were people whose thirst and zealousness for wars on Middle East countries (provided their despots are not clients of the U.S.) match the thirst and zealousness of the neo-conservatives of the George W. Bush administration. Rhodes never explains to his readers why his fake, humanitarian concern for the welfare of the people of the region never extends to people suffering under Israeli occupation and the repression of pro-U.S. despots.

**As'ad AbuKhalil is a Lebanese-American professor of political science at California State University, Stanislaus. He is the author of the *Historical Dictionary of Lebanon* (1998), *Bin Laden, Islam & America's New 'War on Terrorism'* (2002), and *The Battle for Saudi Arabia* (2004). He also runs the popular [blog The Angry Arab News Service](#).**

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## The 'White Helmets' Controversy

**FROM THE ARCHIVES:** As Israel in the past few days helped evacuate 800 "White Helmets" from Syria, en route to Britain and other Western countries, we look back at an article published by Consortium News in Oct. 2016.

**By Rick Sterling**



Across the mainstream Western media, the “White Helmets” are hailed as heroic first responders rescuing injured civilians in rebel-controlled parts of Syria. The U.K. Guardian and The Independent urged the Nobel Committee to award this year’s Nobel Peace Prize to the “White Helmets.” As it turned out, they didn’t get that one, but they did receive the prestigious 2016 “Right Livelihood Award.”

On the U.S. side of the Atlantic, the “White Helmets” are treated with similar uncritical acclaim. They were the subject of the Oct. 17 TIME magazine cover story. Netflix has released a special “documentary” movie about them. (It later won the 2017 Academy Award for Best Documentary.) New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof has gushed over them for years, helping the group’s one-sided depiction of events inside Syria shape the pro-rebel narrative that is pretty much all the American and European publics hear about Syria.

And, this love-fest is not just confined to establishment media. DemocracyNow! ran a puff piece interview with the White Helmet infomercial directors. The Intercept published an uncritical promotion of the “White Helmets” and the group’s controversial leader. Codepink recommended the Netflix movie (though after receiving criticism about the endorsement, the anti-war group removed it).

Yet, despite the favorable “group think” regarding the “White Helmets” – and more broadly about the rebel cause in Syria – there is another side to the story, including the fact that the “White Helmets” are not just some well-meaning Syrians who emerged to help all civilians suffering from the five years of war.

Not only do they only operate in rebel-controlled areas but they are a source of propaganda about the war, indeed their very existence is an element in the larger propaganda campaign to rally international support for a “regime change” war in Syria. The “White Helmets” brand was conceived and directed by a New York-based marketing company named “The Syria Campaign,” which itself was “incubated” by a larger politically oriented marketing company called Purpose.

Along with managing the online and social media promotion of the White Helmets, the Syria Campaign has parallel efforts in support of “regime change” in Syria. One of these efforts has been to criticize United Nations and humanitarian relief organizations that supply aid to displaced persons living in areas protected by the Syrian government.

“The allegations made by the Syria Campaign and others were written by people who know nothing about the UN and how it must work,” according to an NGO worker operating in Damascus.

## Exaggerated Claims

Claims that the “White Helmets” have saved 65,000 people also appear to be wildly exaggerated. The areas, served by the White Helmets and controlled by Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and its rebel allies, have few civilians living in them. A medical doctor visiting east Aleppo two years ago described it as a “ghost town,” yet Western media reports cite a highly inflated estimated population of 250,000.

Perhaps unintentionally, the “White Helmets” and one of their video teams confirmed this reality in producing a “cat video” when cat videos were all the rage on social media. In an apparent bid to bring cat lovers onto the side of “regime change” in Syria, the White Helmets’ video showed White Helmet members playing with stray cats in empty neighborhoods, saying: “The homeowners abandoned this district and its kittens.”

Besides promoting themselves as a humanitarian group, the White Helmets have become essential to the propaganda war by gaining – along with similar pro-rebel “activists” – a virtual monopoly on information from rebel-controlled areas, supplying a steady stream of heart-rending stories and images about suffering children to a credulous Western media wanting to believe everything bad about the Syrian government.

One of the reasons why the “White Helmets” have been so successful in inserting their propaganda into Western media is that most of the rebel zones of Syria, especially east Aleppo, have been off limits to Western journalists and other outside observers for years. Two of the last Western reporters to venture into rebel territory, James Foley and Stephen Sotloff, were subsequently beheaded by the Islamic State.

So, as the Syrian government and its allies finally try to expel Al Qaeda terrorists and their cohorts from east Aleppo, the White Helmets have become a major source for the Western news media which treats these “relief workers” as credible providers of on-the-ground information.

Thus, the positive image of the White Helmets and the group’s skillful use of social media deflect attention from the sectarian, violent and unpopular nature of Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front (recently renamed the Syria Conquest Front) and other armed opposition groups while hyping accusations that Syrian and Russian attacks are primarily hitting civilians.

In other words, the White Helmets have gone from being talked about to being the ones doing the talking. News stories increasingly use White Helmet witnesses as their sources, often in ways that promote the self-serving myth of White Helmet

heroism. One day, CNN announced that a White Helmet aid center had been hit. Another day, TIME magazine claimed that White Helmet workers were being "hunted".

### **'Eyewitness' Accounts**

Reports from the White Helmets also have served as "eyewitness" accounts about the Syrian military using "barrel bombs," including in an attack to destroy a Syrian Arab Red Crescent humanitarian convoy and warehouse on Sept. 19 in Orem al Kubra. But there were reasons to be suspicious of this claim since this town is controlled by the infamous Nour al Din al Zinki terrorist group, which recently filmed itself beheading a Palestinian Syrian boy.

It was also illogical that Syrian or Russian planes would attack a SARC convoy, which they could have stopped when it was in government held territory. Plus, the Syrian government works with SARC. And, the ones to "benefit" from the attack were the rebels and their Western backers who cited this atrocity as another reason for "regime change" and to condemn the Russians for assisting the Syrian government. The attack also took attention away from the U.S. airstrike that killed some 70 Syrian soldiers on Sept. 17.

After the convoy was struck, the Russian and Syrian governments called for an independent investigation of the attack site but this has not been done, presumably because the terrorists controlling the area have not allowed it. Nevertheless, the narrative supplied by the White Helmets and other pro-rebel factions – blaming the Syrian government and their Russian allies – has dominated the Western media's handling of the story.

The "White Helmets" also played a dubious role in allegations that the Syrian government was using chlorine gas in 2013 and 2014 by warning residents before the attacks to expect the Syrian military to drop chlorine bombs, although it was unclear how the activist first-responders would know that fact in advance. In one of the cases, seven witnesses told U.N. investigators that the rebels had staged the chlorine-gas attack, which could suggest that the "White Helmets" were in on the scam.

So, are the White Helmets heroes or a politically motivated hoax? The time to investigate is now, since it does little good to uncover the lies and manipulations years later, as has happened with the Iraqi and Libyan "regime change" invasions.

### **A Dangerous Replay**

Evidence now suggests that we are seeing a replay of Curveball and the Iraqi WMD in 2003 and the bogus hysteria about stopping a Libyan "genocide" in 2011, both

debunked by later investigations but too late to spare those countries from massive death and destruction.

The belated recognition by some Americans that they are being “had” again in Syria has led to some pushback against the mainstream media’s promotion of the “White Helmets” and other pro-rebel activists. In April 2015, Dissidentvoice published an expose of the group’s creation and purpose. Since then there have been other articles and videos revealing the reality behind the “feel good” veneer.

Vanessa Beeley has produced a number of articles about the fraudulent pretense that the “White Helmets” are Syrian Civil Defense, including documentation about the real Syrian Civil Defense, which was founded six decades ago. She initiated an online Change.org petition to NOT give the Nobel Peace Prize to the “White Helmets,” an initiative that must have upset some influential people because Change.org removed the petition without explanation. (You can read the text of the petition here.)

The real Syrian Civil Defense works on a shoestring budget with real volunteers without video teams accompanying and promoting them. Most in the West are unaware the real Syrian Civil Defense even exist. The situation is similar for the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, which is a genuinely neutral and independent relief organization and has a good website.

Another online petition, also at Change.org, which is still up and running, calls on the Right Livelihood Foundation to rescind its award to the “White Helmets.” The petition includes a number of reasons why the group does not deserve the prize and are not what they are presented to be: they stole the name Syria Civil Defense from the real Syrian organization; they appropriated the name “White Helmets” from the Argentinian rescue organization Cascos Blancos/White Helmets; they are not independent; they are funded by governments; they are not apolitical; they actively campaign for a “no-fly zone” (which even Hillary Clinton has acknowledged would “kill a lot of Syrians” although she continues to promote the idea); they do not work across Syria; they only work in areas controlled by the armed opposition, mostly under the command of Al Qaeda’s affiliate Nusra Front; they are not unarmed; they sometimes do carry weapons and they also celebrate terrorist victories; they assist in terrorist executions.

Max Blumenthal wrote a two-part exposé at *Alternet*: “How the White Helmets became International Heroes while Pushing US Intervention and Regime Change in Syria” and “Inside the Shadowy PR Firm that’s Lobbying for Regime Change in Syria.”

(Blumenthal shows how the White Helmets are funded with millions of dollars from

the British Foreign Office and \$23 million from USAID.) Former weapons inspector Scott Ritter, who was one of the few voices daring to contest President George W. Bush's false claims about Iraq's WMD, wrote an article which challenged the White Helmets' "lionization."

Internationally, the Israeli TV station I24 ran a special report with the title "White Helmets: Heroes or Hoax?" – giving equal coverage to supporters and critics. Even "The National" out of United Arab Emirates has documented the controversy around the White Helmets.

Not surprisingly, this dissent to the mainstream media's love affair with the White Helmets drew return fire. The British military contractor who initially set up the group accused critics of being "proxies" for the Syrian and Russian governments (much as Ritter and other skeptics about the Iraqi WMD "group think" were called "Saddam apologists" in 2003).

The controversy also has done little to chasten the Western press corps from relying on the "White Helmets" as the go-to sources for information in Syria's conflict zones.

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

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## Guardians of the Magnitsky Myth

**FROM THE ARCHIVES:** In pursuit of Russia-gate, U.S. mainstream media embraces any attack on Russia and works to ensure Americans don't hear the other side of the story, as with the Magnitsky myth, reported Robert Parry on Oct. 28, 2017.

**By Robert Parry**

*Special to Consortium News*



As Russia-gate becomes the go-to excuse to marginalize and suppress independent and dissident media in the United States, a warning of what the future holds is the blacklisting of a documentary that debunks the so-called Magnitsky case.

The emerging outlines of the broader suppression are now apparent in moves by major technology companies – under intense political pressure – to unleash

algorithms that will hunt down what major media outlets and mainstream “fact-checkers” (with their own checkered histories of getting facts wrong) deem to be “false” and then stigmatize that information with pop-up “warnings” or simply make finding it difficult for readers using major search engines.

For those who believe in a meaningful democracy, those tactics may be troubling enough, but the Magnitsky case, an opening shot in the New Cold War with Russia, has demonstrated how aggressively the Western powers-that-be behave toward even well-reported investigative projects that unearth inconvenient truth.

Throughout the U.S. and Europe, there has been determined effort to prevent the American and European publics from seeing this detailed documentary that dissects the fraudulent claims at the heart of the Magnitsky story.

The documentary – “The Magnitsky Act: Behind the Scenes” – was produced by filmmaker Andrei Nekrasov, who is known as a fierce critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin but who in this instance found the West’s widely accepted, anti-Russian Magnitsky storyline to be a lie.

However, instead of welcoming Nekrasov’s discoveries as an important part of the debate over the West’s policies toward Russia, the European Parliament pulled the plug on a premiere in Brussels and – except for a one-time showing at the Newseum in Washington – very few Americans have been allowed to see the documentary.

Instead, we’re fed a steady diet of the frothy myth whipped up by hedge-fund investor William

Browder and sold to the U.S. and European governments as the basis for sanctioning Russian officials. For years now, Browder has been given a free hand to spin his dog-ate-my-homework explanation about how some of his firms got involved a \$230 million tax fraud in Russia.

Browder insists that some “corrupt” Russian police officers stole his companies’ corporate seals and masterminded a convoluted conspiracy. But why anyone would trust a hedge-fund operator who got rich exploiting Russia’s loose business standards is hard to comprehend.

The answer is that Browder has used his money and political influence to scare off and silence anyone who dares point to the glaring contradictions and logical gaps in his elaborate confection.

So, the hedge-fund guy who renounced his U.S. citizenship in favor of a British passport gets the royal treatment whenever he runs to Congress. His narrative just fits so neatly into the demonization of Russia and the frenzy over stopping

“Russian propaganda and disinformation” by whatever means necessary.

This summer, Browder testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee and argued that people involved in arranging the one-time showing of Nekrasov’s documentary should be prosecuted for violating the Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA), which carries a five-year prison term.

Meanwhile, the U.S. mainstream media helps reinforce Browder’s dubious tale by smearing anyone who dares question it as a “Moscow stooge” or a “useful idiot.”

### **Magnitsky and Russia-gate**

The Magnitsky controversy now has merged with the Russia-gate affair because Russian lawyer Natalia Veselnitskaya, who traveled to America to challenge Browder’s account, arranged a meeting with Donald Trump Jr. and other Trump campaign advisers in June 2016 to present this other side of the story.

Though nothing apparently came from that meeting, *The New York Times*, which always treats Browder’s account as flat fact, led its Saturday editions with a breathless story entitled, “A Kremlin Link to a Memo Taken to Trump Tower,” citing similarities between Veselnitskaya’s memo on the Magnitsky case and an account prepared by “one of Russia’s most powerful officials, the prosecutor general Yuri Y. Chaika.” Cue the spooky music as the *Times* challenges Veselnitskaya’s honesty.

Yet, the *Times* article bows to Browder as the ultimate truth-teller, including repetition of his assertion that Sergei Magnitsky was a whistleblowing “tax lawyer,” rather than one of Browder’s accountants implicated in the tax fraud.

While Magnitsky’s profession may seem like a small detail, it gets to the heart of the mainstream media’s acceptance of Browder’s depiction of Magnitsky – as a crusading lawyer who died of medical neglect in a Russian prison – despite overwhelming evidence that Magnitsky was really a clever accountant caught up in the scheme.

The “lawyer” falsehood – so eagerly swallowed by the *Times* and other mainstream outlets – also bears on Browder’s overall credibility: If he is lying about Magnitsky’s profession, why should anyone believe his other self-serving claims?

As investigative reporter Lucy Komisar noted in a recent article on the case, Browder offered a different description when he testified under oath in a New York court deposition in a related federal civil case.

In that adversarial setting, when Browder was asked if Magnitsky had a law degree, Browder said, “I’m not aware that he did.” When asked if Magnitsky had

gone to law school, Browder answered: “No.”

Yet, the Times and the rest of the mainstream media accept that Magnitsky was a “lawyer,” all the better to mislead the American public regarding his alleged role as a whistleblower.

The rest of Browder’s story stretches credulity even more as he offers a convoluted explanation of how he wasn’t responsible for bogus claims made by his companies to fraudulently sneak away with \$230 million in refunded taxes.

Rather than show any skepticism toward this smarmy hedge-fund operator and his claims of victimhood, the U.S. Congress and mainstream media just take him at his word because, of course, his story fits the ever-present “Russia bad” narrative.

Plus, these influential people have repeated the falsehoods so often and suppressed contrary evidence with such arrogance that they apparently feel that they get to define reality, which – in many ways – is what they want to do in the future by exploiting the Russia-gate hysteria to restore their undisputed role as the “gatekeepers” on “approved” information.

Which is why Americans and Europeans should demand the right to see the Nekrasov documentary and make their own judgments, possibly with Browder given a chance after the show to rebut the overwhelming evidence of his deceptions.

Instead, Browder has used his wealth and connections to make sure that almost no one gets to see the deconstruction of his fable. And *The New York Times* is okay with that.

*[For details on the Nekrasov documentary, see Consortiumnews.com’s “[A Blacklisted Film and the New Cold War.](#)”]*

**The late investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his last book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).**

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## Meanwhile, About Those Other Issues at

# the Summit

They actually held a Russian-American summit in Helsinki on Monday to talk about life and death issues, though you wouldn't know it from the corporate media. Alexander Mercouris explores some of those other issues.

**By Alexander Mercouris**



The summit meeting between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin has finally taken place in Helsinki to thunderous condemnation on the part of many in the West.

Some talk luridly of the beginning of the end of the West. Others talk hysterically of treason.

Others see the summit as a damp squib, which will change nothing and which will leave the relationship between the U.S. and Russia and between Russia and the West essentially unchanged, with the current state of hostility continuing indefinitely unabated.

In my opinion both views are wrong (the first obviously so) and both misunderstand, and in the case of the first wilfully misrepresent, what actually happened in Helsinki.

I discussed the background to the summit in an article I wrote a month ago for *The Duran* at a time when first reports that the summit was in the offing were beginning to circulate.

In that article I said that there was no possibility that Putin would make unilateral concessions to Trump over the status of Crimea or over the conflict in Ukraine and that the idea that he would agree to the U.S. and Ukrainian proposal for a peacekeeping force to be deployed to the Donbass was certainly wrong and that that idea had already been categorically ruled out by the Russians.

I was also skeptical that there would be any sort of 'grand bargain' between the U.S. and the Russians over Syria.

On the subject of Syria, in the weeks leading up to the summit there were some media reports suggesting that Donald Trump was coming under pressure from Israel, the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates to agree a deal at the summit with Putin whereby Russia would be granted sanctions relief and possibly even recognition of Crimea, US troops in Syria would be withdrawn, and in return the Russians would agree that Iranian forces would be expelled from Syria.

The Russians were clearly worried by these reports. Not only did they go out of their way to deny them, but Putin and Lavrov held talks in Moscow on 12th July 2018 with Ali Akbar Velayati, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's Special Adviser on International Relations, in order to reassure the Iranians that they were not true.

### **'Grand Bargain' Unlikely**

As I explained in my lengthy discussion of Benjamin Netanyahu's recent visit to Moscow on Victory Day, it would in fact be wholly contrary to established principles of Russian foreign policy for the Russians to agree to a 'grand bargain' like this.

From the Russian point of view relations between Iran and Syria are relations between two sovereign nations and are none of Russia's business.

Not only is it not Russia's business to interfere in whatever relations Iran and Syria have with each other, but Russia lacks the means to do so anyway, with any request from Moscow to Tehran and Damascus to sever or downgrade their relations certain to be refused, and with Russia having no means to force either country to comply with such a request save through steps which would put at risk its relations with both of these countries.

All Russia would achieve were it ever to make such a request would be to damage its relations with Iran and Syria and lose face, bringing down upon itself accusations of bad faith from the US, Saudi Arabia and Israel when it inevitably failed to follow through.

Here is what I said about how Putin would respond to a demand from Netanyahu to rein in the Iranians in Syria if it were made to him during Netanyahu's Victory Day visit, and nothing which has happened since would have caused Putin to change his position.

Contrary to what some people are saying, I think it is most unlikely that Putin would have given Netanyahu any assurances that Russia would act to rein in Iranian activities in Syria. If Netanyahu asked Putin for such assurances (which I also think unlikely) Putin would almost certainly have told him what the Russians always say when faced with requests for such assurances: Iran and Syria are sovereign states and Russia cannot interfere in arrangements two sovereign states make with each other.

I suspect that the source of some of the stories about a 'grand bargain' between Putin and Trump involving the role of the Iranians in Syria is the regular discussions the Russians have with the Israelis, the Iranians and the Syrians whereby the Russians routinely pass on to the Iranians and the Syrians Israeli

concerns about the presence of Iranian forces in Syria in particular locations as well as Israeli concerns about specific actions which the Iranians take.

A good example of these sort of discussions was an exchange between Putin and Netanyahu during Netanyahu's most recent trip to Moscow on 11th July 2018. The [Kremlin's website](#) reports Netanyahu and Putin saying the following to each other:

**Benjamin Netanyahu:** .....Of course, our focus is on developments in Syria, the presence of Iran. This is not new to you. Several hours ago, an unmanned aerial vehicle entered the territory of Israel from Syria and was successfully brought down. I would like to emphasise that *we will counter any and all attempts to violate our air or land borders.*

Cooperation between us is an essential, key factor that can stabilise the entire region. So, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to meet with you and discuss these things.

**Vladimir Putin:** We are aware of your concerns. Let us discuss them in detail.

The Russians are not engaged here in discussions over some sort of 'grand bargain' to remove all Iranian troops from Syria, which as I have said they would see as counterproductive and impossible. Rather they are engaged in the classic diplomatic exercise of conflict prevention: keeping the Israelis, the Iranians and the Syrians informed about each other's moves and red lines in order to prevent an uncontrolled escalation of the conflict between them, which might risk an all-out war, which nobody wants, and which the Russians are doing their best to prevent.

Recent reports of an understanding between the Israelis, the Iranians and the Syrians supposedly brokered by the Russians whereby Iranian forces agreed not to participate in the Syrian army's ongoing military operations in south west Syria close to the Israeli occupied Golan Heights are a case in point.

The Iranians and the Syrians agreed to this, not because the Russians forced them to but because it is in their interest to. The Syrian army does not need Iranian help to defeat the Jihadis in southwest Syria so keeping the Iranians away from the area allows the Syrians to clear the area of the Jihadis without risking a military confrontation with Israel.

Needless to say, just as the Russians were not prepared to make concessions on Crimea and Donbass or on Syria, so they were not prepared to back Donald Trump's

ongoing campaign against Iran.

Not only are the Russians deeply committed to the JCPOA (which they partly brokered) but they are also committed to improving their relations with Iran.

In addition, given that the ongoing U.S. campaign against Iran is clearly intended to achieve regime change there, the Russians are bound to oppose it because they oppose regime change everywhere.

If the Russians were not prepared to make unilateral concessions to Trump on Crimea, Donbass, Syria or Iran, neither was Trump despite all the pre-summit scaremongering going to make unilateral concessions to Russians.

Stories that Trump would announce a cancellation of U.S. military exercises in Europe or even a withdrawal of U.S. troops from Europe had no basis in reality, and needless to say nothing like that happened. Nor did Donald Trump recognise Crimea as Russian or announce that he would lift sanctions on Russia.

### **The Question of Crimea**

The question of the sanctions and of the recognition of Crimea as Russian requires a little discussion since there is a widespread view that Trump is prevented by the Countering American Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATS) from either lifting the sanctions or from recognising Crimea as Russian

This is something of a misconception. In reality, as I discussed last year at the time when CAATS was enacted, CAATS is unconstitutional, as Donald Trump himself carefully explained in his Signing Statement, because of the unconstitutional restrictions it places on the President's ability to conduct foreign policy.

If and when Donald Trump decides that the time has come to lift the sanctions and to recognise Crimea as Russian, then all he has to do is apply to the U.S. Supreme Court to have CAATS set aside. His Signing Statement shows that he has had legal advice that it will do so.

That point has not yet been reached for political not legal reasons. In the meantime it is an error to think of CAATS as the insuperable constraint on Donald Trump's actions that many appear to believe it is.

Trump did not commit himself to lift the sanctions, and he did not recognise Crimea as Russian, not so much because of the legal constraints placed upon him by CAATS but because doing so would have put at risk his political position in the US in advance of November's mid-term elections, and because – compulsive deal-maker that he is – he is hardly likely to take such radical steps anyway without first getting something back in return.

One of the fundamental problems caused by the hysterical campaign which is being waged against Donald Trump is that it causes even many of Donald Trump's supporters to believe that he is more supportive of Russia's positions on a variety of issues than he really is. The result is that he is constantly suspected of being prepared to make unilateral concessions to the Russians when unilateral concessions are precisely the sort of things which as a self-professed master deal-maker he is known to most abhor.

Donald Trump is – as he repeatedly says – an America First nationalist, and his overriding priority is to make what he considers to be the best possible deal for the United States. Unilateral concessions just don't come into it and it is a fundamental error to think that they do.

Putin understands all this very well, as he made clear during his joint press conference with Trump in Helsinki.

**Vladimir Putin:** Regarding whom you can believe and whom you can't, you shouldn't believe anyone. What makes you think President Trump trusts me and that I fully trust him? He defends the interests of the United States of America. I defend the interests of the Russian Federation. We do have converging interests, and we are seeking common ground. We have issues that we disagree on so far. We are seeking options to settle these differences and make our work more constructive.

Which brings me to the fundamental reason for the summit, and why it is also a mistake in my opinion to see it as an empty show or a damp squib.

Donald Trump sought the summit – it is clear that the initiative for the summit came from him – because as he has repeatedly said since before he was elected President, prior to the summit he did not know Putin well.

The number of times Trump has said this is in fact practically beyond count. For example, he said it during a news conference in Miami on 27th June 2016

I don't know who Putin is. He said one nice thing about me. ... I never met Putin...

He also said it during the second Presidential debate on 9th October 2016

I don't know Putin...

Trump has gone on to say the same thing again and again since. He has also repeatedly said that only time would tell whether he and Putin would get on with each other and would be able to come to agreements with each other.

### **The Need for a One-on-One**

A fundamental prerequisite for any successful negotiation is for the two parties to the negotiation to know each other's minds so that a modicum of trust and understanding – essential if any agreement is to be reached – can be established between them.

As a businessman Trump knows this very well. He therefore needed to meet with Putin in a lengthy one-to-one encounter in order to get to know Putin properly so as to see whether Putin is in fact the sort of person he can negotiate and eventually do a deal with.

That is the reason why Trump insisted that his first meeting with Putin should take the form of a one-to-one encounter.

That by the way is absolutely standard practice in negotiations – both commercial negotiations and diplomatic negotiations – with leaders of negotiating teams often meeting privately in one-to-one meetings in order to get to know each other better to see whether a deal between them is even possible. Once a proper relationship between them is established the full negotiating teams can be brought into the negotiations in what in diplomacy are called 'plenary sessions'. Needless to say it is during the plenary sessions – with each side's experts present – that the details are discussed and ironed out.

Not only is this standard practice in negotiations – Putin does it all the time – but it is simply not true as some people are suggesting that there was no one else present in the room when Putin and Trump met with each other.

Both Putin and Trump obviously had interpreters present. Trump doesn't speak Russian and Putin speaks English badly. The job of the interpreters – who are full time state officials – is not just to interpret what the leaders say to each other but also to prepare a written transcript (a "stenographic record") of what they said.

Once this transcript is written up – something which normally takes no more than a few days – it is circulated to senior officials including in the U.S. case to the U.S. President's two most important foreign policy advisers, Bolton and Pompeo. By now it is highly likely that Bolton and Pompeo have already seen and read through the transcript, and that they therefore know exactly what Putin and Trump said to each other.

Since the one-to-one meeting was first and foremost a “get-to-know” you session, no binding agreements would have been reached during it, and neither Putin nor Trump – each in their own way an experienced negotiator – would ever have imagined that they would be.

In summary, the one-to-one meeting between Putin and Trump is not a sign of some secret understanding between them; far less is it a case of an “intelligence asset” meeting his “controller” as some are crazily suggesting.

On the contrary it is further proof of what each of them has repeatedly said at various times: before the summit they did not know each other well, so that the summit was called precisely in order to give each of them the opportunity to get to know the other better.

The essential point about the summit is that Putin and Trump did find that they could deal with each other and did discover areas of common concern which in time it might be possible for them to build on as they search for areas of agreement between them. During their joint press conference Putin confirmed as much:

We do have converging interests, and we are seeking common ground. We have issues that we disagree on so far. We are seeking options to settle these differences and make our work more constructive.

As for the points of possible convergence, Putin in his usual structured way set them out:

I consider it important, as we discussed, to get the dialogue on strategic stability and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction on track. We made a note with a number of concrete proposals on this matter available to our American colleagues.

We believe that continued joint efforts to fully work through the military-political and disarmament dossier is necessary. That includes the renewal of the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, the dangerous situation surrounding the development of elements of the US global missile defence system, the implementation of the Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles, and the topic of deploying weapons in space.

We are in favour of continued cooperation in the sphere of combating terrorism

and ensuring cybersecurity. Notably, our special services are working together quite successfully. The most recent example of that is the close operational interaction with a group of US security experts as part of the World Cup in Russia that ended yesterday. Contacts between the special services should be made systematic. I reminded the President of the United States about the proposal to reconstitute the anti-terror working group.

We covered regional crises extensively. Our positions do not coincide on all matters, but nonetheless there are many overlapping interests. We should be looking for common ground and working more closely, including at international forums.

Of course, we talked about regional crises, including Syria. With regard to Syria, restoring peace and harmony in that country could serve as an example of successful joint work.

Of course, Russia and the United States can take the lead in this matter and organise cooperation to overcome the humanitarian crisis and help refugees return to their hearths.

We have all the requisite elements for effective cooperation on Syria. Notably, Russian and American military have gained useful experience of interaction and coordination in the air and on land.

I would also like to note that after the terrorists are routed in southwest Syria, in the so-called "southern zone", the situation in the Golan Heights should be brought into full conformity with the 1974 agreement on the disengagement of Israeli and Syrian forces.

This will make it possible to bring tranquillity to the Golan Heights and restore the ceasefire between the Syrian Arab Republic and the State of Israel. The President devoted special attention to this issue today....

We paid special attention to the economy. Obviously, there is interest in cooperation in the business circles of both countries. The US delegation

was one of the biggest at the St Petersburg International Economic Forum in May. It consisted of over 500 US entrepreneurs.

To develop trade and investment, President Trump and I agreed to establish a high-level group that would unite captains of Russian and American business. Business people better understand how to go about mutually beneficial cooperation. Let them consider what can be done and make recommendations.

## **The Nuclear Issue**

The emphasis – as I discussed in my [article](#) of a month ago – is on arms control, though Putin also seems to have gone out of his way to reassure Trump that the restoration of the Syrian government's control over southwest Syria would not put in jeopardy Israel's position in the Golan Heights. In addition there also seems to have been a fair amount of discussion about future economic cooperation.

The result was an agreement between Putin and Trump to reopen channels of communication between their governments and to meet regularly with each other as they feel their way towards a rapprochement.

To be clear, that rapprochement will not mean and is not intended to mean that the U.S. and Russia will cease to be adversaries and will become friends.

Instead what is being discussed are steps to bring to a stop the downward spiral in their relations, with each side obtaining a better understanding of the other side's moves and red lines, so that hopefully geopolitical disasters like the 2014 Maidan coup can be avoided in future.

That would be a major advance over what has existed previously given that since the USSR collapsed in 1991 the U.S. has refused to acknowledge that Russia has any right to any opinions at all, let alone to act independently or set out red lines.

Needless to say the more often Putin and Trump meet the more 'normalised' relations between the US and Russia become, with each meeting provoking less controversy than the previous one, with the whole process beyond a certain point becoming routine so that it attracts ever less attention and (hopefully) eventually becomes uncontroversial.

It is because the powerful forces in the U.S. who scorn the idea of a 'geopolitical ceasefire' and want ever greater confrontation between the U.S. and Russia do not want to see relations 'normalised' in this way that their

reaction to the summit has been so hysterical.

As of the time of writing it is these people who in the media and on twitter are making the running. However it may be a mistake to see in the volume of the noise they are making a true reflection of their influence.

Last February's Nuclear Posture Review suggests that there is a very powerful constituency within the U.S. and specifically within the Pentagon which might potentially support the sort of 'geopolitical ceasefire' with Russia that Donald Trump appears to be gradually working towards.

The Nuclear Posture Review shows that some sections of the US military understand how dangerously overstretched the US has become as it responds simultaneously to challenges from Russia in Europe and from China in the Pacific. Both Putin and Trump mentioned during their news conference the extent to which their respective militaries are already in contact with each other and are working well together

**Donald Trump:** Well, our militaries do get along. In fact, our militaries actually have gotten along probably better than our political leaders for years, but our militaries do get along very well and they do coordinate in Syria and other places. Ok? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:**.....On the whole, I really agree with the President. Our military cooperation is going quite well. I hope that they will continue to be able to come to agreements just as they have been....

That may be a sign that there is more understanding of what Donald Trump is trying to do – at least within the U.S. defence establishment – than the hysteria the Helsinki summit has provoked might suggest.

Overall, provided it is clearly understood that what Putin and Trump are working towards is a detente style 'geopolitical ceasefire' and not 'friendship' – and certainly not an alliance – it can be said that their summit in Helsinki was a good start and a success.

What happens next depends on whether the forces of realism and sanity in the U.S. can prevail over those of megalomania and hysteria. Given how entrenched the latter have become unfortunately no one can count on this.

However some sort of process which may in time lead to detente and an easing of tensions between the nuclear superpowers has begun. Given the circumstances in

which it has been launched that is more than might have been expected even a short time ago, and for that one should be grateful.

*This article originally appeared on The Duran.*

**Alexander Mercouris is a political commentator and editor of The Duran.**

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## Inside WikiLeaks: Working with the Publisher that Changed the World

Italian journalist Stefania Maurizi has worked with WikiLeaks for nine years on the Podesta emails and other revelations. Here's an insider's view of the publisher, which has incensed rulers around the world, desperate to hide their corruption.

**By Stefania Maurizi**

**in Rome**

*Special to Consortium News*



Silenced and cut off from the outside world, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has been confined to the Ecuadorian embassy in London for the last six years with no access to sunlight, fresh air, or proper medical treatment. Furthermore, last March President Lenin Moreno's Ecuadorian government cut his access to the internet, phone calls and even visitors and journalists. For a man who has already been confined to the embassy for so long, these restrictions are particularly harsh.

I began working as one of WikiLeaks' media partners in 2009, before Assange and WikiLeaks published such bombshells as the "Collateral Murder" video. Over the last nine years, I have partnered with WikiLeaks on behalf of my newspaper, the Italian daily *La Repubblica* to work on the Podesta emails and many of its other secret files, except for those that WikiLeaks released without media partners: the DNC emails, the Saudi Cables, Turkey's ruling party emails, the Hacking Team documents, the Collateral Murder video and the Brennan emails.

Like its work or not, WikiLeaks is an independent media organization that doesn't have to rely on traditional media to publish its scoops. Indeed it was founded to bypass the legal qualms traditional media may have about publishing classified information.

With its 5.5 million followers on Twitter, WikiLeaks has a huge social media presence that gives its work immediate impact. But WikiLeaks has published most of its revelations in collaboration with a number of media partners.

For instance, I was a partner in the publication of the emails of John Podesta, Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign manager, which were published by WikiLeaks shortly after the infamous *Access Hollywood* video revealed candidate Donald Trump making rude remarks about women.

Many media outlets continue to report that the Podesta emails were released only minutes after the *Access Hollywood* video aired, hinting at some sort of coordination between WikiLeaks and the Trump campaign. In a indictment issued last Friday, Robert S. Mueller III, the special counsel investigating the alleged Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. elections, charged 12 officers of the Russian military intelligence service, GRU, for having allegedly hacked both the DNC and Podesta emails and allegedly passed them on to WikiLeaks for publication.

I have no idea who WikiLeaks' sources were for the Podesta emails: the whole concept of WikiLeaks is based on the submission of secret or otherwise restricted documents by anonymous sources. Assange said numerous times that his source for the Clinton emails was not the Russian government nor a state party.



As I worked on the Podesta emails, I do know that their publication was not a last-second decision. I had been alerted the day before, and their staggered release was a choice WikiLeaks made after the organization was harshly criticized by mainstream media for publishing the DNC documents all at once. This time the emails would trickle out to make them easier for the public to digest. But that was criticized too by the U.S. media and the Democrats as an attempt to leave Clinton bleeding a few weeks before the elections.

## Ready to Release Trump Documents

I was also a witness when WikiLeaks received four documents about Trump's business at a certain point during the campaign and media partners were asked to help verify the documents to determine if they should be published. The WikiLeaks team had already prepared a placeholder graphic for a possible release on Trump: a caricature of Trump and his characteristic hairstyle. Unfortunately, we found that the documents had already been made public.

Over the last nine years of my work in partnership with WikiLeaks on behalf of first the Italian newsmagazine *L'Espresso* and then *La Repubblica*, I have spent many hours talking to Assange and his staff, maintaining weekly contact with them. Looking back, I realize that in all those years, I only met Assange as a free man once. That was in September 2010: he had just left Sweden to meet me and other journalists in Berlin after the publication of the Afghan War Logs. At that time, I didn't realize so many years would pass without seeing him free again.

He is one of the most demonized men on the planet. "We are in the business of crucifixion," he told me several months ago, before Ecuador cut his social contacts. Indeed he has been crucified for whatever he has done: he talked to the press? He is a narcissist. He didn't talk to the press? He wants to fuel his image as an international mystery man. He is a complicated human being, but he is neither a hard man nor the imperious, James Bond-style villain depicted by newspapers. He can be warm, with a sharp sense of humor, and he is definitely brilliant and bold enough to publish exceptionally risky documents.

## The Full Force of the State

WikiLeaks is rather unique from many standpoints. As a media organization publishing exclusively secret or otherwise restricted documents on "invisible powers," such as intelligence agencies, which citizens do not normally perceive as directly relevant to their lives, there is little doubt that WikiLeaks has the full force of the State against it. It is probably the only Western media organization to have been under continuous investigation by the U.S. authorities – and probably others—since 2010, and it is definitely the only one whose editor is arbitrarily detained in the heart of Europe.

Whenever I say that Assange is the only editor arbitrarily detained in Europe, some object that he isn't detained, or that he isn't an editor at all. But that he is arbitrarily detained is the opinion of the United Nations' Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, whose decisions are considered authoritative by the European Court of Human Rights. The UK government has always rejected the UN body's decision on Assange, and even tried to appeal it. Since losing this

appeal, the UK authorities have continued to ignore the decision and apparently no one else has anything to say about it.

Many argue that Assange is not detained, but rather is in a state of “self-imposed exile,” since he could leave the embassy at any time. He could, if he wanted to, walk out and be arrested by the UK authorities, on now flimsy skipping bail conditions after Sweden dropped its investigation against him, and he’d face the risk of extradition to the United States. Last year the former head of the CIA, Mike Pompeo, attacked him and his organization ferociously, calling WikiLeaks a “non-state hostile intelligence service.” The current Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, has declared that arresting him is a priority.

Assange’s lawyers believe a grand jury in the state of Virginia has likely rendered a sealed indictment against him. Theoretically he is protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. constitution, which protects publication of stolen documents, something that major media does routinely. However, through the last years we have seen many attempts by the U.S. authorities to claim WikiLeaks and Assange have no First Amendment rights.

Curiously, those critics who insist he is in a form of self-imposed exile or confinement seem to forget that Assange has attempted all sorts of legal routes to challenge his detention. I have never heard of someone imposing exile on himself while at the same time attempting various legal means to put an end to it.

Assange’s latest appeal to the Westminster Magistrates’ Court was dismissed last February by the British judge Emma Arbuthnot, in a ruling indicating that for UK Justice it is perfectly fine for an individual to remain confined to a tiny building for almost six years with no access to sunlight, fresh air or proper medical treatment. “I do not find that Mr. Assange’s stay in the Embassy is inappropriate, unjust, unpredictable, unreasonable, unnecessary or disproportionate”, concluded Arbuthnot with no British irony.

As far as the concept of “editor” goes, I can refer to my own experience, describing what I have seen on my end: Assange has always been the person coordinating WikiLeaks publication activities, making the editorial choices, deciding how to present the revelations to the public—just like any editor of traditional media. He and his organization are far from perfect: they have made mistakes and questionable choices, but it is a matter of fact that they have revealed very important information in the public interest.

## **Journalism and Beyond**

Thanks to WikiLeaks, it has been possible to reveal the true face of the U.S.

wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq ([Afghan War Logs](#), [Iraq War Logs Files](#) and [Collateral Murder](#)), the identities of Guantanamo detainees ([Gitmo Files](#)), the scandals and embarrassing diplomatic deals contained in 251,287 U.S. diplomacy cables, such as pressure from the U.S. to neutralize Italian prosecutors investigating the extraordinary rendition of the Milan cleric, Abu Omar ([Cablegate](#)).

It has been possible to reveal the inner workings of the U.S. private intelligence firm Stratfor ([GIFiles](#)) and the National Security Agency intercepts on German, French, Italian and Japanese leaders, including intercepts of the controversial, former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi ([NSA World Spying Files](#)). WikiLeaks also revealed EU operations to stop migrants and refugees ([EU Military Ops Against Refugee Flow Files](#)), and the CIA cyber weapons ([Vault 7 Files](#)). Its [Tunisia Files](#) contributed to the uprising there that set off the so-called Arab Spring. WikiLeaks has also released a cache of [Spy Files](#) from Russia.

All this valuable information has been made available to the world by WikiLeaks completely free of charge, so that once in the public domain, journalists, activists, scholars and citizens can access it directly worldwide, without needing media organizations or journalists to access the original files and make informed choices.

This publication strategy has worked: the exiled Islanders from the Chagos Archipelago for example have been using the U.S. diplomacy cables in court to support their struggle to return to the Chagos Islands, while a German citizen, Khaled el-Masri, [used the cables](#) to support his case at the European Court of Human Rights against his extraordinary rendition.

As WikiLeaks sees it, publishing information in the public interest is an act that involves journalism, but also goes beyond journalism. That is why after partnering with media organizations, WikiLeaks makes the files publicly available so that everyone can access and use them.

Assange and his team pioneered a model so effective that it has been copied by many. They started a platform for anonymous submission of secret or otherwise restricted documents, a concept which has since been adopted by almost all major media outlets. They also established cross-jurisdictional collaborative reporting, now a model for major organizations like the Consortium of Investigative Journalists, which published notable revelations like the Panama Papers.

## **Risk**

Throughout the last nine years, I have seen Assange and his staff take enormous risks. "They run towards the risks everyone else runs away from," Edward Snowden once told me in an interview. That means they take risks corporate media won't take. At the end of the day corporate media are corporations: many decide they can afford only limited legal risks. As for the extralegal risks, few traditional editors and journalists are eager to end up confined to an embassy for six years.

We have seen what happened to Snowden when he was abandoned in Hong Kong: it took Assange's close adviser, Wikileaks journalist Sarah Harrison, and the WikiLeaks' staff to help him seek asylum. Although the newspapers that had obtained the Snowden files could have exerted enormous contractual power if they had wanted to broker an agreement with the U.S. government to protect Snowden, none of them did. As the American science fiction author Bruce Sterling put it: "It's incredible to me that, among the eight zillion civil society groups on the planet that hate and fear spooks and police spies, not one of them could offer Snowden one shred of practical help, except for Wikileaks."

From the very beginning, I have witnessed the virulent attacks against Assange and his staff and the dramatic failure of mainstream and non-mainstream journalists to seek factual information on the Swedish case by means of FOIA or other investigative tools. In the course of these last seven years, no media has tried to access the full file on Julian Assange and WikiLeaks.

It took an Italian journalist to litigate a FOIA in Sweden and in the UK because no international or local journalist had done so. While my FOIA litigation unearthed some suspicious facts (like the deletion of many crucial emails written and received by the British lawyer who had handled the Assange case for the Crown Prosecution Service – a deletion for which the UK authorities have provided no explanation) there has been no follow-up by any international or British media.

### **The Kremlin's Useful Idiots?**

Recently, *The Guardian* said, "Assange has a longstanding relationship with Russia Today. He has regularly appeared in interviews with the Russian broadcaster and hosted a program on RT in 2012." In reality the broadcasting license for that program, known as "The World Tomorrow", was acquired by my newsgroup as well, which publishes *La Repubblica* and *l'Espresso*. As far as I know, that program was not the product of any unique collaboration between WikiLeaks and RT.



While it is true that Assange and his staff have appeared on the Russian channel numerous times, I have only heard of one instance in which RT was a partner with WikiLeaks in the publication of secret files: the “Spy Files”, a series about brochures on private companies selling surveillance technologies. When WikiLeaks partners

with traditional media, the partners know each other, they share the findings and the workload. Based on what I have observed, RT has never been part of this process, though it is true that RT quickly jumps on whatever WikiLeaks publishes, running articles on WikiLeaks publications based on the organization’s press releases and reporting on everything on the WikiLeaks front.

Russia perceives Assange as a sort of Western dissident. The country definitely loves the idea of “Western dissidents” and is happy to stick a finger in the eyes of the West by assuring wide coverage for Assange and his organization. Russia media highlights the contradictions in Western democracies which, while preaching aggressive journalism and the protection of journalistic sources, have instead put Chelsea Manning in prison, charged Snowden, investigated WikiLeaks for the last eight years and has kept its editor arbitrarily detained with no end in sight.

WikiLeaks has been accused of being the Kremlin’s useful idiot or its laundromat, or even a front for Russian intelligence. These kinds of allegations have been spread by the media with no solid evidence, always quoting anonymous intelligence officials who have an obvious interest in destroying WikiLeaks’ reputation. To protect himself and his organization, Assange has always avoided revealing the inner workings of WikiLeaks so as to not expose its resources and vulnerabilities to powerful entities like the CIA, which perceive WikiLeaks as an existential threat to themselves.

This approach has helped project an allure of mystery and menace which has been

used by many media outlets to fuel a vitriolic campaign against Assange and WikiLeaks as James Bond-style villains with something dark to hide. Had Assange and his team ever lifted the veil and allowed the public to see the inner workings of WikiLeaks, public opinion would have perceived what is really behind it: a willingness to take the heat even in the face of very powerful entities.

No one can say how it will end for Assange and his team: if they end up in jail in the United States, it will be the first time that an editor and a media organization are imprisoned in the U.S. for their work, at least not since John Peter Zenger in Colonial America. As the icon of whistleblowers, Daniel Ellsberg, put it: "Under Trump, he may well be the first journalist in this country to be indicted." There is a deafening silence on the impact of such a scenario on the freedom of the press and on the human rights of Assange and his staff.

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