

# In the Dark on the 'Dark Side'

The "War on Terror" now more than 14 years long has trapped the U.S. and other nations in the "dark side" of human behavior, a dilemma that is both moral and practical because the continued use of brutal methods has only made the crisis worse, as Nicolas J S Davies explains.

By Nicolas J S Davies

France and Russia's military responses to mass murders in Paris and Egypt echo the United States' response to mass murders in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania in 2001. As Oxford University researcher Lydia Wilson told Democracy Now on Nov. 17, Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh) is "seemingly delighted" by this warlike response to its latest atrocities.

In several interviews, Lydia Wilson has cited Abu Bakr Naji's The Management of Savagery as a "playbook" that ISIS appears to be following closely. Naji called for mass murders in foreign cities and tourist destinations as part of a strategy to draw foreign powers into unwinnable wars that would spread chaos, fuel jihadism and leave Muslim fundamentalist groups in control of more and more of the Muslim world.

This builds on Al Qaeda's original strategy, which counted on an aggressive response to the 9/11 attacks to expose the iron fist inside the velvet glove of U.S. "soft power" and the hollowness of the U.S. government's commitment to civil liberties, human rights and the rule of law. Al Qaeda astutely turned its enemy's military superiority into a liability by provoking the U.S. to unleash disastrous wars on Muslim countries.

The U.S. invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq and the concentration camp at Guantanamo became the most valuable assets in Al Qaeda's propaganda and recruiting campaigns, now complemented by the terror of drone strikes and bombing campaigns in Syria and Iraq.

As the UN Human Rights Commissioner, Prince Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein of Jordan, told the Council on Foreign Relations on Nov. 16, "it seems that the defenses against chaos and bloodshed that states erected at the close of the Second World War, the laws they wrote and swore to abide by, the agreements and treaties they signed, are giving way to increasing action bound by no principle or any foresight. ... Much of the Middle East and North Africa is gripped in deadly conflict with constant, now almost routine, violations of the norms that should protect civilians, and even proxy warfare with greater powers engaged in combat rather than in making peace."

To briefly take stock of 14 years of war, which our leaders launched and continue to justify as a response to terrorism:

–The U.S. and its allies have conducted over 120,000 air strikes against seven countries, exploding fundamentalist jihadism from its original base in Afghanistan to an active presence in all seven countries and beyond.

–The U.S. and its allies have invaded and occupied Afghanistan for 14 years, Iraq for over eight years, and destroyed Libya, Syria and Yemen for good measure.

–By conservative estimates, U.S.-led wars have killed about 1.6 million people, mostly civilians. That is 500 times the number of people killed by the original crimes in the United States. Disproportionate use of force and geographic expansion of the conflict by our side has ensured an endless proliferation of violence on all sides.

–War, occupation and human rights abuses have driven 59.5 million people from their homes, more than at any time since the Second World War.

–Since 2001, the U.S. has borrowed and spent \$3.3 trillion in additional military spending to pay for the largest unilateral military build-up in history, but less than half the extra funding has been spent on current wars. (See Carl Conetta’s 2010 paper, “An Undisciplined Defense”, for more analysis of the Pentagon’s “spending surge.”)

When U.S. support for Muslim fundamentalist jihadis in Afghanistan led to the most catastrophic blowback in our history on Sept. 11, 2001, the U.S. government declared a “global war on terror” against them. But less than a decade later, it once again began recruiting, training and arming Muslim fundamentalists to fight in Libya and Syria.

The U.S. also made the largest arms sale in history to Saudi Arabia, which is already ruled by a dynasty of Muslim fundamentalists whose role in the 9/11 crimes remains a closely guarded secret. It was only when ISIS invaded Iraq in 2014 that the U.S. government was finally forced to rethink its covert support for such groups in Syria. It has yet to seriously reconsider its alliances with their state sponsors: Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and other Arab monarchies.

Throughout the past 14 years, whenever the fear of terrorism has temporarily receded, the U.S. government has quickly redirected its threats and uses of military force, covert operations and propaganda to a completely different purpose: destabilizing and overthrowing a laundry-list of internationally recognized governments, in Venezuela, Iraq, Honduras, Libya, Syria, Ukraine and around the world.

In these operations, the U.S. government has never balked at allying with violent groups whom it would be quick to condemn as “terrorists” if they were on the other side. The American people are being treated to a new version of President Ronald Reagan’s comical division of violent groups into “terrorists” and “freedom fighters” based on their relationship to U.S. policy.

In more recent years, patriotic Iraqis who resisted the illegal invasion of their country were “terrorists” and armed neo-Nazis in Ukraine were first noble “protesters” and are now part of a new “National Guard.”

Each new U.S. military operation is justified as a response to some new crisis, while the U.S. role in creating these crises in the first place is obscured (with increasing difficulty) behind funhouse mirrors of secrecy and propaganda.

This pattern of opportunistic uses of force was exactly the strategy outlined by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld within hours of the mass murders on Sept. 11, 2001. CBS News obtained a copy of Undersecretary Stephen Cambone’s notes from a meeting amid the ruins of the Pentagon at 2:40 p.m. that day. Cambone quoted Rumsfeld saying, “Judge whether good enough hit S.H. (Saddam Hussein) at same time – not only UBL (Usama Bin Laden) ... Go massive. Sweep it all up. Things related and not.”

In a recent article about the record U.S. military budget, I explained that President Obama’s annual military budgets have (on average and after adjusting for inflation) been higher than George W. Bush’s, 60 percent higher than President Bill Clinton’s and 2½ times what bipartisan experts recommended to the Senate Budget Committee at the end of the Cold War. The U.S. military is now more generously funded than the rest of the ten largest militaries in the world combined.

Investing our nation’s wealth in military forces and deadly weapons and deploying them all over the world is not just a tragic waste in terms of all the unmet human needs in our country and the world. It’s dangerous. By building a global war machine designed to fight anybody anywhere, while rejecting all legal and political constraints on how it may be used, U.S. leaders have set the stage for endless, unwinnable, global war.

As Prince Zeid suggested, the U.S. government has turned its back on the legitimate infrastructure of collective security enshrined in the UN Charter and international law, and reverted to something more primitive: the law of the jungle or “might makes right.”

By fostering the dangerous illusion that illegal threats and uses of U.S. military force can replace the collective will of humanity and the rule of

international law as the ultimate arbiter of international affairs, U.S. leaders have set us on a collision course with history.

When the U.S. invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, Russia and China remained on the sidelines. Their oil companies even bid for contracts on new oilfields in Iraq, and Russia allowed the U.S. to ship war supplies through its territory to Afghanistan. In 2011, Russia and China both abstained from a UN Security Council resolution for a “no fly zone” supposedly to protect civilians in Libya when they could have simply vetoed it.

But when the U.S. and its allies abused that resolution to depose and butcher Muammar Gaddafi and plunge Libya into chaos, then transitioned quickly to launch an even bloodier proxy war in Syria, China and Russia finally accepted that the U.S. war machine was really out of control. The U.S. was treating their efforts at appeasement as a green light for aggression that would sooner or later threaten them directly.

In 2012, Russia increased its military budget by 15 percent, the largest annual increase since Vladimir Putin was elected President in 2000. After the destruction of Libya, Russia concluded that it was essential to face down U.S. aggression and that the catastrophic failures of U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya provided an opening for Russian diplomacy to start pushing back.

The U.S. responded to Russia’s support for the Syrian government by engineering a coup against an even more strategic Russian ally in Ukraine. The Western-backed coup threatened to roll NATO expansion right up to Russia’s border and sail NATO warships into its most strategic naval base at Sevastopol.

Russia responded by accepting Crimea’s request to restore its 230-year-old ties with Russia (94 percent of Crimeans had already voted for independence from Ukraine in 1991). Russia also supported the “Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics” in their resistance to the new Western-backed government in Kiev.

U.S. allies in Europe initially supported the U.S. campaign to isolate and sanction Russia over the chaos in Ukraine, but now France and Germany are working with Russia and Ukraine to implement the Minsk agreements, which are gradually restoring peace to Ukraine.

Until recently, Russia played a deft diplomatic hand without being directly drawn into combat in Syria or Ukraine. But now Russia has joined the free-for-all bombing of Syria. ISIS has responded by blowing up a Russian airliner over Egypt’s Sinai. Russia has in turn escalated its aerial bombardment of jihadist targets inside Syria. Last week, Turkey shot down an Su-24 warplane along the Syrian border.

It seems that Russia is being drawn into the same escalating cycle of violence as the U.S. and its allies. Much depends on the results of the diplomatic process in Vienna and on the willingness of all the external powers involved in the war in Syria to allow the people of Syria to decide their own political future. That includes the U.S. and its allies just as much as Russia and Iran.

On a larger scale, it is vital for us to recognize that the United States, by authorizing the use of military force in 2001, became a party to this open-ended conflict and shares the responsibility for escalating or resolving it. Demonizing America's "enemies" is not a responsible or legitimate pretext for endlessly escalating an ill-defined war that has killed far more civilians than combatants.

But by declaring that we are at war with "terror," "Muslim extremism," "associated forces" or whoever our leaders decide we're at war with from one week to the next, the U.S. government has foreclosed many of the ways that wars are usually brought to an end. We cannot meet "terror" at the negotiating table.

The international military competition to "destroy" ISIS at whatever cost in civilian death and destruction, is an irresistible chance for the U.S., Russia, France and the U.K. to display and market their latest weapons technology. But it will not end the "war on terror." Even a superficially successful military campaign against ISIS in Syria and Iraq will instead hasten the next mutation of jihadism and drive even more Muslims from around the world into its ranks.

Even President Obama has acknowledged that there is no military way out of the trap that he and other U.S. officials have unwittingly collaborated with the "terrorists" to set for us. Yet he still soldiers on blindly as if there are no non-military alternatives either.

But there are and always have been specific policy changes that the U.S. government could make if it were serious about ending this horrific cycle of violence:

–Repeal the 2001 and 2002 Congressional Authorizations for the Use of Military Force, which have become blank checks for endless war. Reps. Lee (D), Amash (R) and Massie (R) have introduced bills in Congress to do that: HR 1303 (to repeal the 2001 AUMF) and HR 1304 (to repeal the 2002 AUMF).

–Close the U.S. concentration camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Every prisoner must either be released or be granted a free and fair trial in a real court.

–Stop threatening, bombing and attacking Muslim countries – and other ones too.

- Stop destabilizing and overthrowing internationally-recognized governments.
- End drone strikes and comply with long-standing executive orders prohibiting assassination as an instrument of U.S. policy.
- Shut down the "rat-line" of U.S. weapons to jihadi groups everywhere.
- Enforce existing U.S. laws that prohibit arms sales to governments that commit war crimes or human rights abuses, with no exceptions for U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia, Israel or Iraq.
- Stop using the U.S. veto to block majority decisions of the UN Security Council on Israel and Palestine.
- Publicly recommit to full compliance with the UN Charter, the Geneva Conventions and the rule of international law.
- Restore command accountability under U.S. law for war crimes ordered or sanctioned by senior U.S. military and civilian officials.

If these steps seem radical or "politically impossible," that is only a measure of how far the United States has strayed from the basic standards of international behavior that we and other countries are committed to. But if the U.S. government refuses to take such steps, then we must recognize that we share the responsibility for perpetuating the horrors of this conflict.

As the late historian and former U.S. Air Force bombardier Howard Zinn wrote in a letter to the New York Times in 2007, "The terrorism of the suicide bomber and the terrorism of aerial bombardment are indeed morally equivalent. To say otherwise (as either side might) is to give one moral superiority over the other, and thus serve to perpetuate the horrors of our time."

On the other hand, if we can restore some legitimacy to U.S. policy, we can begin to regain the moral and legal ground from which to respond effectively to terrorism. If or when there is another mass murder like the ones in the U.S. in 2001 or the recent ones in Egypt, Lebanon and France, we must respond to it as a heinous crime rather than as an act of war, as former Nuremberg prosecutor Benjamin Ferencz insisted in the aftermath of 9/11.

Those responsible must be identified, pursued, arrested and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, with only as much help from the military as is needed to bring them to justice. But as Ferencz warned in 2001, their crimes must not be allowed to become a pretext for wreaking misdirected vengeance on other countries and innocent lives.

This is how we will defeat terrorism – theirs and ours.

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

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## Turkey Provokes Russia with Shoot-down

**Exclusive:** Turkey appears to have deliberately shot down a Russian warplane as a provocation designed to escalate tensions between NATO and Russia, a ploy that seems to have sucked in President Obama as he tries to look tough against Russia to appease his neocon critics, writes Robert Parry. (Update: Russia says one airman saved.)

By Robert Parry

President Barack Obama always sensitive to neocon criticism that he’s “weak” continues to edge the world closer to a nuclear confrontation with Russia as he talks tough and tolerates more provocations against Moscow, now including Turkey’s intentional shoot-down of a Russian warplane along the Turkish-Syrian border.

Rather than rebuke Turkey, a NATO member, for its reckless behavior or express sympathy to the Russians Obama instead asserted that “Turkey, like every country, has a right to defend its territory and its airspace.”

It was another one of Obama’s breathtaking moments of hypocrisy, since he has repeatedly violated the territorial integrity of various countries, including in Syria where he has authorized bombing without the government’s permission and has armed rebels fighting to overthrow Syria’s secular regime.

Obama’s comment on Turkey’s right to shoot down planes – made during a joint press conference with French President Francois Hollande on Tuesday – was jarring, too, because there was no suggestion that even if the SU-24 jetfighter had strayed briefly into Turkish territory, which the Russians deny, that it was threatening Turkish targets.

Russian President Vladimir Putin angrily called the Turkish attack a “stab in the back delivered by the accomplices of terrorists.” He warned of “serious consequences for Russian-Turkish relations.”

Further provoking the Russians, Turkish-backed Syrian rebels then killed the Russian pilot riddling his body with bullets as he and the

navigator parachuted from the doomed plane and were floating toward the ground. (Update: On Wednesday, the Russian defense minister said the navigator was alive and was rescued by Syrian and Russian special forces.)

Another Russian soldier was killed when a U.S.-supplied TOW missile brought down a Russian helicopter on a search-and-rescue mission, according to reports.

But Obama, during the news conference, seemed more interested in demonstrating his disdain for Putin, referring to him at one point by his last name only, without the usual use of a courtesy title, and demeaning the size of Putin's coalition in helping Syria battle the jihadist rebels.

"We've got a coalition of 65 countries who have been active in pushing back against ISIL for quite some time," Obama said, citing the involvement of countries around the world. "Russia right now is a coalition of two, Iran and Russia, supporting [Syrian President Bashar al-] Assad."

However, there have been doubts about the seriousness of Obama's coalition, which includes Sunni countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which have been covertly supporting some of the jihadist elements, including Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and its ally, Ahrar al-Sham.

Syrian rebels, including jihadists fighting with Ahrar al-Sham, have received hundreds of U.S. TOW anti-tank missiles, apparently through Sunni regional powers with what I've been told was Obama's direct approval. The jihadists have celebrated their use of TOWs to kill tank crews of the Syrian army. Yet Obama talks about every country's right to defend its territory.

Obama and the U.S. mainstream media also have pretended that the only terrorists that need to be fought in Syria are those belonging to the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh), but Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and its ally, Ahrar al-Sham, which was founded in part by Al Qaeda veterans, make up the bulk of the Turkish-and-Saudi-backed Army of Conquest which was gaining ground with the help of those American TOW missiles until Russia intervened with air power at the request of Syrian President Assad in late September.

### **The SU-24 Shoot-down**

As for the circumstances surrounding the Turkish shoot-down of the Russian SU-24, Turkey claimed to have radioed ten warnings over five minutes to the Russian pilots but without getting a response. However, the New York Times reported that a diplomat who attended a NATO meeting in which Turkey laid out its account said "the Russian SU-24 plane was over the Hatay region of Turkey for about 17 seconds when it was struck."



How those two contradictory time frames matched up was not explained. However, if the 17-second time frame is correct, it appears that Turkey intended to shoot down a Russian plane whether over its territory or not to send a message that it would not permit Russia to continue attacking Turkish-backed rebels in Syria.

After shooting down the plane, Turkey sought an emergency NATO meeting to support its attack. Though some NATO members reportedly consider Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan a loose cannon, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg declared that the allies “stand in solidarity with Turkey.”

Further increasing the prospect of a dangerous escalation, NATO has been conducting large-scale military exercises near the Russian border in response to the Ukraine crisis.

Erdogan’s government also appears to have dabbled in dangerous provocations before, including the alleged role of Turkish intelligence in helping jihadist rebels stage a lethal sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, with the goal of blaming Assad’s military and tricking Obama into launching punitive airstrikes that would have helped clear the way for a jihadist victory.

Obama only pulled back at the last minute amid doubts among U.S. intelligence analysts about who was responsible for the sarin attack. Later evidence pointed to a jihadist provocation with possible Turkish assistance, but the Obama administration has never formally retracted its allegations blaming Assad’s forces.

One motive for Erdogan to go along with the sarin “false flag” attack in 2013 would have been that his two-year campaign to overthrow the Assad government was sputtering, a situation similar to today with the Russian military intervention hammering jihadist positions and putting the Syrian army back on the offensive.

By shooting down a Russian plane and then rushing to NATO with demands for retaliation against Russia, Erdogan is arguably playing a similar game, trying to push the United States and European countries into a direct confrontation with Russia while also sabotaging Syrian peace talks in Vienna all the better to advance his goal of violently ousting Assad from power.

### **The Neocon Agenda**

Escalating tensions with Russia also plays into the hands of America’s neoconservatives who have viewed past cooperation between Putin and Obama as a threat to the neocon agenda of “regime change,” which began in Iraq in 2003 and was supposed to continue into Syria and Iran with the goal of removing governments deemed hostile to Israel.

After the sarin gas attack in 2013, the prospect for the U.S. bombing Syria and paving the way for Assad's military defeat looked bright, but Putin and Obama cooperated to defuse the sarin gas crisis. The two teamed up again to advance negotiations to constrain Iran's nuclear program an impediment to neocon hopes for bombing Iran, too.

However, in late 2013 and early 2014, that promising Putin-Obama collaboration was blasted apart in Ukraine with American neocons playing key roles, including National Endowment for Democracy president Carl Gershman, Sen. John McCain and Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland.

The neocons targeted the elected government of President Viktor Yanukovich, recognizing how sensitive Ukraine was to Russia. The Feb. 22, 2014 coup, which was spearheaded by neo-Nazis and other extreme Ukrainian nationalists, established a fiercely anti-Russian regime in Kiev and provoked what quickly took on the look of a new Cold War.

When the heavily ethnic Russian population of Crimea, which had voted overwhelmingly for Yanukovich, reacted to the coup by voting 96 percent to leave Ukraine and rejoin Russia, the neocon-dominated U.S. mainstream media pronounced the referendum a "sham" and the secession a Russian "invasion." Cold War hysteria followed.

However, in the nearly two years since the Ukraine coup, it has become increasingly clear that the new regime in Kiev is not the shining light that the neocons and the mainstream media pretended it was. It appears to be as corrupt as the old one, if not more so. Plus, living standards of average Ukrainians have plunged.

The recent flooding of Europe with Syrian refugees over the summer and this month's Paris terror attacks by Islamic State jihadists also have forced European officials to take events in Syria more seriously, prompting a growing interest in a renewed cooperation with Russia's Putin.

That did not sit well with ultranationalist Ukrainians angered at the reduced interest in the Ukraine crisis. These activists have forced their dispute with Russia back into the newspapers by destroying power lines supplying electricity to Crimea, throwing much of the peninsula into darkness. Their goal seems to be to ratchet up tensions again between Russia and the West.

Now, Turkey's shoot-down of the SU-24 and the deliberate murder of the two Russian pilots have driven another wedge between NATO countries and Russia, especially if President Obama and other NATO leaders continue taking Turkey's side in the incident.

But the larger question indeed the existential question is whether Obama will continue bowing to neocon demands for tough talk against Putin even if doing so risks pushing tensions to a level that could spill over into a nuclear confrontation.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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## Going Nativist on Syrian Refugees

The political opportunism over Syrian refugees from Donald Trump, Ted Cruz and other GOP presidential candidates is one of the uglier features of the growing hysteria over terrorism. It also reflects a recurring strain of nativism that has infected the U.S. public at times of stress, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar recalls.

By Paul R. Pillar

A couple of days ago, President Barack Obama made an appropriate refinement to how he describes the discriminatory and xenophobic tendencies that have become all too obvious in debate and posturing in the United States on issues related to Syria, ISIS, the Paris attacks, and refugees.

A week earlier at [a press conference](#) in Turkey, in expressing dismay at how "those who have taken on leadership" in the party of George W. Bush ignore how Mr. Bush had made clear that counterterrorism was not a war on Islam, Mr. Obama said, "That's not who we are."

This past weekend, in [remarks in Malaysia](#), the President said that some of the excuses being made for Americans to reject Syrian refugees are "not representative of the best of who we are." Inclusion of the qualifier *the best* is important. Although American history has featured the concept of the melting pot and the idea of a new people being created and enriched by the inclusion of diverse other peoples without regard to ethnicity or religion, the United States also has had an ignoble strain of bias and nativism.

That strain has repeatedly surfaced throughout the nation's history, stimulated at different times by different fears and issues. Sometimes such prejudice has been targeted narrowly at some groups and in favor of others, which, in a sense, is the only kind of racial or ethnic bias one should be able to find in a nation of immigrants.

This is true of the "Cubans si, Syrians no" approach to the admission of refugees that has become a sore point for certain presidential candidates who have been challenged about it. But underlying the specific manifestations has been a primitive, fearful way of looking at one's circumstances and at the world that says much more about the looker than about the target of the bias. It is a state of mind that involves prejudice against everyone not entirely like oneself. It is a state of mind that Mel Brooks satirized four decades ago in *Blazing Saddles*.

One of the most politically significant past manifestations of the nativist strain was the Know-Nothing Party (officially, the American Party), which enjoyed some electoral success in the 1850s. The Know-Nothing platform centered around opposition to immigrants and especially to Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Germany (although the party sought the support of native-born Catholics in the South).

The party reached the peak of its strength in 1854, when it won 52 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives (more than one-fifth of the chamber) and won control of several large northern cities and the Massachusetts legislature. In the presidential election of 1856 the Know-Nothing ticket (led by former President Millard Fillmore, who did not seek the nomination) won 22 percent of the popular vote nationwide and carried the state of Maryland.

Later upsurges of nativism were mixed with other forms of bias, such as in the heyday of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. Repeatedly there has been a reluctance to welcome foreign refugees, including Jews fleeing Nazism in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, despite America being a nation of immigrants. Fear of terrorism also has gotten mixed into issues of immigration, as when activity of Lebanese Hezbollah in South America led to imaginary scenarios of terrorists wading into the United States across the Rio Grande.

Now fear of terrorism is again getting infused into issues of immigration and asylum for refugees. Such infusion has little or no merit. It is questionable whether it has merit even in Europe, where the attacks in Paris, accompanied by reports of some of the perpetrators having gotten into the flow of refugees from the Middle East, have fed similar fears on that side of the Atlantic. All of the attackers identified so far are nationals of European Union countries, and the reports of infiltration of refugee flows may be false.

Even assuming the worst as it applies to Europe, the situation in the United States is far different from that in Europe, with its huge numbers of refugees walking across the Balkans and some of them squeezing through border fences. Any sophisticated and reasonably well-heeled terrorist group would be stupid to rely on a U.S. refugee program to move operatives into the United States, given the very time-consuming and detailed vetting process involved. It would be quicker and easier to do so with tourist or business visas, as the 9/11 hijackers did.

The refugee asylum issue is being treated as it is in U.S. political debate because of the same sort of nativist inclinations that have repeatedly surfaced in the past. One indication of this is how big a role anti-immigrant themes had played in the contest for the Republican presidential nomination even before the events in Paris.

The Republican campaign also demonstrates how much the whole set of attitudes involved has become another of the multitude of issues and attitudes in this country that demonstrate a marked partisan split. The split is not total and clean, and it never has been with American nativism.

The mayor of Roanoke, Virginia who approvingly referred to the internment of Japanese Americans (whom he mistakenly described as “Japanese foreign nationals”) during World War II is a Democrat. And 47 of the 188 Democrats in the House of Representatives voted in favor of the recent bill that would curtail even the current small numbers of grants of asylum to Syrian refugees. But Republican support in the House for the same bill was a near-unanimous 242 votes.

The leading Republican candidate for the presidential nomination has indicated he would support establishment of a registry of Muslim Americans, although he later maybe backed off a bit, blaming loud music for the way he had answered a question on that subject. His opponents for the nomination have tried to match his appeal to the sentiments involved by advancing ideas such as that only Christians and not Muslims should be admitted as refugees from deadly turmoil in the Middle East.

Islamophobia has been the dominant sub-thread in the most recent manifestation of the longstanding nativist, prejudicial thread in American attitudes. It too, demonstrates a marked partisan difference. Given the way Americans take many of their cues from leaders of whichever party they identify with, it is hard to say which came first, the demos or the demagogue.

What can be said is that themes along this line in the Republican primary campaign are appeals to attitudes that opinion polling confirms exist in the party base. In a recent Bloomberg poll, a large majority of Republicans, 69

percent, versus only 36 percent of Democrats, opposed admitting any Syrian refugees to the United States.

This finding is very likely related to attitudes uncovered by the question that the pollsters asked immediately before that and gets closer to tapping Islamophobia. Nearly twice as many Republicans as Democrats (32 percent to 17 percent), believed that “Islam is an inherently violent religion, which leads its followers to violent acts” rather than being a peaceful religion with “some who twist its teachings to justify violence.”

There are respectable ways to debate related questions about a religion that expanded in large part by the sword, but it is a safe bet that the answers of the vast majority of respondents in this poll were not based on a study of Islamic history or exegesis of the Koran.

The rise and decline of the Know-Nothings occurred in a period of much flux in the American party system. The Know-Nothings benefited from the decline of the Whig Party. But then they themselves were hurt by the same intense divisions over slavery that helped to disable the Whigs. A new party, the Republican Party, emerged and quickly ascended by being clearly and firmly on the right side of the slavery issue.

The Republican Party has performed a great reversal with regard to issues of inclusiveness or exclusiveness and the attitudes to be applied to those with characteristics or backgrounds different from one’s own. From the inclusiveness of the anti-slavery cause, it now has come to fill the role of the Know-Nothings.

Unlike the Know-Nothings, it is not going away. There is no current issue comparable to slavery that has the same capacity to reshuffle the party system. And by amalgamating an issue such as immigration or asylum for refugees with issues of terrorism and security, it can present at least a verisimilitude of consistency and of having worthy reasons for its candidates to appeal to sentiments that represent not the best of who we are but rather something else.

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# Hitting Saudi Arabia Where It Hurts

**Exclusive:** Though faced with a global terrorism crisis, Official Washington can't get beyond its neocon-led "tough-guy-gal" rhetoric. But another option financial sanctions on Saudi Arabia might help finally shut down the covert supply of money and arms to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

As the Islamic State and Al Qaeda enter a grim competition to see who can kill more civilians around the world, the fate of Western Civilization as we've known it arguably hangs in the balance. It will not take much more terror for the European Union to begin cracking up and for the United States to transform itself into a full-scale surveillance state.

Yet, in the face of this crisis, many of the same people who set us on this road to destruction continue to dominate and indeed frame the public debate. For instance, Official Washington's neocons still insist on their recipe for "regime change" in countries that they targeted 20 years ago. They also demand a new Cold War with Russia in defense of a corrupt right-wing regime in Ukraine, further destabilizing Europe and disrupting U.S.-Russian cooperation in Syria.

Given the stakes, you might think that someone in a position of power or one of the many candidates for U.S. president would offer some pragmatic and realistic ideas for addressing this extraordinary threat. But most Republicans from Marco Rubio to Carly Fiorina to Ted Cruz only offer more of "more of the same," i.e. neocon belligerence on steroids. Arguably, Donald Trump and Rand Paul are exceptions to this particular hysteria, but neither has offered a coherent and comprehensive counter-analysis.

On the Democratic side, frontrunner Hillary Clinton wins praise from the neocon editors of The Washington Post for breaking with President Barack Obama's hesitancy to fully invade Syria. Former Secretary of State Clinton wants an invasion to occupy parts of Syria as a "safe area" and to destroy Syrian (and presumably Russian) planes if they violate her "no-fly zone."

Much like the disastrous U.S. invasions of Iraq and Libya, Clinton and her neocon allies are pitching the invasion of Syria as a humanitarian venture to remove a "brutal dictator" in this case, President Bashar al-Assad as well as to "destroy" the Islamic State, which Assad's army and its Iranian-Russian allies have also been fighting. Assad's military, Iranian troops and Russian planes have hit other jihadist groups, too, such as Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham, which receives U.S. weapons as it fights side-by-side with Nusra in the Army of Conquest.

Clinton's strategy likely would protect jihadists except for the Islamic State – and thus keep hope alive for “regime change” – explaining why the Post's neocon editors, who were enthusiastic boosters of the Iraq War in 2003, hailed her hawkish approach toward Syria as “laudable.”

To Clinton's left, Sen. Bernie Sanders has punted on the issue of what to do in either Syria or the Middle East, failing to offer any thoughtful ideas about what can be done to stabilize the region. He opted instead for a clever but vacuous talking point, arguing that the Saudis and other rich oil sheiks of the Persian Gulf should use their wealth and militaries to bring order to the region, to “get their hands dirty.”

The problem is that the Saudis, the Qataris and the Kuwaitis along with the Turks are a big part of the problem. They have used their considerable wealth to finance and arm Al Qaeda and its various allies and spinoffs, including the Islamic State. Their hands are already very dirty.

### **Saudi 'Hard Power'**

What we have seen in the Middle East since the 1980s is Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states creating “hard power” for their regional ambitions by assembling paramilitary forces that are willing and even eager to lash out at “enemies,” whether against Shiite rivals or Western powers.

While the wealthy Saudis, Qataris and other pampered princes don't want to become soldiers themselves, they're more than happy to exploit disaffected young Sunnis, turn them into jihadists and unleash them. Al Qaeda (dating back to the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s) and the Islamic State (emerging in resistance to the U.S.-installed Shiite regime in Iraq after 2003) are Saudi Arabia's foot soldiers.

This reality is similar to how the Reagan administration supported right-wing paramilitary forces in Central America during the 1980s, including “death squads” in El Salvador and Guatemala and the drug-tainted “Contras” in Nicaragua. These extremists were willing to do the “dirty work” that Reagan's CIA considered necessary to reverse the tide of leftist revolution in the region, but with “deniability” built in so Official Washington couldn't be directly blamed for the slaughters.

Also, in the 1980s, the Reagan administration's hardliners, including CIA Director William J. Casey, saw the value of using Islamic extremism to undermine the Soviet Union, with its official position of atheism. The CIA and the Saudis worked hand in hand in building the Afghan mujahedeen an Islamic fundamentalist movement to overthrow the Soviet-backed secular government in Kabul.



The “success” of that strategy included severe harm dealt to the struggling Soviet economy and the eventual ouster (and murder) of the Moscow-backed president, Najibullah. But the strategy also gave rise to the Taliban, which took power and installed a medieval regime, and Al Qaeda, which evolved from the Saudi and other foreign fighters (including Saudi Osama bin Laden) who had flocked to the Afghan jihad.

In effect, the Afghan experience created the modern jihadist movement and the Saudis, in particular, understood the value of this paramilitary force to punish governments and political groups that the Saudis and their oil-rich friends considered threats. Officially, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Sunni oil states could claim that they weren't behind the terrorists while letting money and arms slip through.

Though Al Qaeda and the other jihadists had their own agendas and could take independent action the Saudis and other sheiks could direct these paramilitary forces against the so-called “Shiite crescent,” from Iran through Syria to Lebanon (and after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, against Iraq's Shiite government as well).

At times, the jihadists also proved useful for the United States and Israel, striking at Hezbollah in Lebanon, fighting for “regime change” in Syria, collaborating in the 2011 ouster (and murder) of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, even joining forces with the U.S.-backed Ukrainian government to kill ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine.

### **Israeli Role**

Since these Sunni jihadists were most adept at killing Shiites, they endeared themselves not only to their Saudi, Qatari and Kuwaiti benefactors, but also to Israel, which has identified Shiite-ruled Iran as its greatest strategic threat. Thus, the American neocons, who collaborate closely with Israel's right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, had mixed attitudes toward the Sunni jihadists, too.

Plus, high-profile terrorism, including the 9/11 attacks, enabled the tough-talking neocons to consolidate their control over U.S. foreign policy, diverting American fury over Al Qaeda's killing nearly 3,000 people in New York and Washington to implement the neocons' “regime change” agenda, first in Iraq though it had nothing to do with 9/11, with plans to move on to Syria and Iran.

As the Military-Industrial Complex made out like bandits with billions upon billions of dollars thrown at the “War on Terror,” grateful military contractors kicked back some profits to major think tanks where neocon thinkers were

employed to develop more militaristic plans. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A Family Business of Perpetual War.](#)"]

But the downside of this coziness with the Sunni jihadists has been that Al Qaeda and its spinoff, the Islamic State, perceive the West as their ultimate enemy, drawing from both [historic and current injustices](#) inflicted on the Islamic world by Europe and the United States. The terrorist leaders cite this mistreatment to recruit young people from impoverished areas of the Middle East and the urban slums of Europe and get them to strap on suicide-belts.

Thus, Al Qaeda and now the Islamic State not only advance the neocon/Israeli/Saudi agenda by launching terror attacks in Syria against Assad's government and in Lebanon against Hezbollah, but they strike out on their own against U.S. and European targets, even in Africa where Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for last week's murderous assault on an upscale Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, Mali.

It also appears that Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have entered into a competition over who can stage the bloodiest attacks against Westerners as a way to bolster recruitment. The Bamako attack was an attempt by Al Qaeda to regain the spotlight from the Islamic State which boasted of a vicious string of attacks on Paris, Beirut and a Russian tourist flight in the Sinai.

The consequence of these murderous rampages has been to threaten the political and economic cohesion of Europe and to increase pressures for a strengthened surveillance state inside the United States. In other words, some of the most treasured features of Western civilization personal liberty and relative affluence are being endangered.

Yet, rather than explain the real reasons for this crisis and what the possible solutions might be no one in the U.S. mainstream political world or the major media seems able or willing to talk straight to the American people about how we got here.

### **Sanders's Lost Opportunity**

While you might have expected as much from most Republicans (who have surrounded themselves with neocon advisers) and from Hillary Clinton (who has cultivated her own ties to the neocons and their liberal interventionist sidekicks), you might have hoped that Sanders would have adopted a thoughtful critique of Official Washington's neocon-dominated "group think."

But instead he offers a simplistic and nonsensical prescription of demanding the Saudis do more when that would only inflict more death and destruction on the region and beyond. Arguably, the opposite would make much more sense impose

tough financial sanctions against Saudi Arabia as punishment for its continued support for Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Freezing or confiscating Saudi bank accounts around the world might finally impress on the spoiled princes of the Persian Gulf oil states that there is a real price to pay for dabbling in terrorism. Such an action against Saudi Arabia also would send a message to smaller Sunni sheikdoms that they could be next. Other pressures, including possible expulsion from NATO, could be brought to bear on Turkey.

If the West finally got serious about stopping this financial and military support for Al Qaeda, the Islamic State and their jihadist allies in Syria, the violence might finally abate. And, if the United States and Europe put pressure on the “moderate” Syrian opposition whatever there is of it to compromise, a political solution might be possible, too.

Right now, the biggest obstacle to a political agreement appears to be the U.S. insistence that President Assad be barred from elections once Syria achieves some stability. Yet, if President Obama is so certain that the Syrian people hate Assad, it seems crazy to let Assad’s presumed defeat at the polls obstruct such a crucial deal.

The only explanation for this U.S. stubbornness is that the neocons and the liberal hawks have made “regime change” in Syria such a key part of their agenda that they would lose face if Assad’s departure was not mandated. However, with the future of Western civilization in the balance, such obstinate behavior seems not only feckless but reckless.

From understanding how this mess was made, some U.S. politician could fashion an appeal that might have broad popular support across the political spectrum. If Sanders took up this torch for a rational plan for bringing relative peace to the Middle East, he also might shift the dynamics of the Democratic race.

Of course, to challenge Official Washington’s “group think” is always dangerous. If compromise and cooperation suddenly replaced “regime change” as the U.S. goal, the neocons and liberal hawks would flip out. But the stakes are extremely high for the planet’s future. Maybe saving Western civilization is worth the risk of facing down a neocon/liberal-hawk temper tantrum.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The**

trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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## A 'See-No-Evil' Drone War

The mainstream U.S. news media has failed miserably in holding the U.S. government to account for the killing of civilians in its drone strikes during the 14-year-old "war on terror," rarely supplying such unpleasant facts even when they become available, writes John Hanrahan.

By John Hanrahan

By now you know the drill: The CIA or U.S. military forces unleash a drone strike or other aerial bombardment in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia or any other country that the United States claims the right to attack.

A U.S. government spokesperson reports 5 or 7 or 17 or 25 or whatever number of "militants" killed, Taliban, or Al Qaeda or ISIS/ISIL/Islamic State fighters, according to its fill-in-the-blanks press release. Wire services, mainstream newspapers, television newscasters dutifully report in brief fashion on another successful drone or missile strike, fulfilling minimal journalistic standards by attributing it to the Pentagon, or intelligence or U.S. government sources, sometimes even naming the spokesperson who issued the news release.

And then, usually nothing. Yes, sometimes someone with a little clout raises a stink, say the Afghan president, or some prominent local official who was an eyewitness to the attack, or Doctors without Borders after the U.S. attack on their Afghanistan hospital in October. (\* See footnote.) In such challenges to the Americans' claims of killing only "militants," these pesky eyewitnesses contend that many of those killed were actually noncombatants, even women and children.

But on those occasions when U.S. officials are confronted with too-strong evidence of civilian casualties, they typically issue an apology (while not usually admitting civilians were actually killed), promise an investigation, and then that's the last we ever seem to hear of it in the mainstream press.

Now, an American University (A.U.) academic, Jeff Bachman, has [documented](#) what some readers may have surmised in reading drone news coverage over the years, but didn't have the data to back it up. In examining articles by *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* in the immediate aftermath of U.S. drone strikes between 2009 and 2014, Bachman concluded:

“Both papers have substantially underrepresented the number of civilians killed in drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen, failed to correct the public record when evidence emerged that their reporting was wrong and ignored the importance of international law.”

Bachman’s research dovetails with *The Intercept*’s recently published “[Drone Papers](#)” articles, which among other things document the U.S. government’s lying to the press and public about the number of noncombatants killed in drone strikes.

Bachman, professional lecturer in human rights and the co-director of Global Affairs M.A. Program at A.U.’s School of International Service, examined a sample of 81 *Times* articles and 26 *Post* articles published within two days of particular drone strikes between 2009 and 2014. He then compared the two papers’ reporting to the research and tracking of drone strikes by the London-based The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ). He said he considered TBIJ’s data authoritative “because they used a methodology that has been endorsed by the Center for Civilians in Conflict and Human Rights” at Columbia University’s Law School.

In the drone attacks reported on by *The Times*, TBIJ found civilians killed in 26 of the 81 attacks. *The Times*, though, reported civilians killed in only two of those attacks, Bachman wrote.

Looking at *The Post*’s coverage of drone attacks, Bachman found that TBIJ reported civilians killed in seven of the 26 attacks, while *The Post* reported civilians killed in only one attack.

In the 33 strikes that produced civilian casualties, TBIJ found that between 180 and 302 civilians were killed, yet *Times* and *Post* articles reported on the deaths of only nine civilians in the three stories in which they noted that there were civilian casualties.

“This trend of underreporting of civilian casualties means readers are not being informed of the real consequences of drone strikes in Yemen and Pakistan,” Bachman wrote. “It represents a failure by journalists at these papers to view critical government claims regarding who is killed in particular strikes.”

Even worse, Bachman reports what happened when he contacted both newspapers to question them “about the inaccuracies in their reporting on civilian casualties, and to see whether either newspaper published corrections” about civilian deaths from drone strikes. “The answer from both was that they had not,” he wrote.

Read Bachman’s [article](#) to see the full summary of his findings and the exact comments he reports receiving from *Times* and *Post* representatives. But for one

sample of mainstream media indifference to this issue, consider what Bachman reported he was told by Sylvester Monroe, *The Post's* assistant managing editor.

Monroe, wrote Bachman, "stated that when using 'official sources' it is impossible to 'independently verify which of the dead were members of militant groups and which might have been innocent civilians.'"

According to Bachman, Monroe added this amazing disclosure: "Even if the CIA were to acknowledge that its count was inaccurate, it would not be up to us to run a correction." Let that sink in: *The Post* will apparently not make corrections of a spy agency's lies and misrepresentations even in the unlikely event the agency itself admits them.

Bachman also noted that the term "human rights", and various equivalents, showed up in only five of *The Times's* 81 drone attack stories, and in only one of the 26 *Post* articles. The term "laws of war" or "laws of armed conflict", needed to "place the drone strikes in their international legal context", were not mentioned in any of the articles.

"Without government transparency and accurate reporting, whistleblowers, like the source of *The Intercept's* 'Drone Papers,' are the only source for information that will allow us to understand the real consequences of the drone strikes," Bachman concluded.

\*The Oct. 2 multiple U.S. bombings on the Doctor Without Borders hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan, where at least 30 staff, patients and others were killed, might prove to be that unique case that events will force to be seriously investigated. But don't count on it. In the Kunduz hospital case, eyewitnesses, Westerners/doctors from a highly respected international humanitarian medical organization making allegations that the bombings were deliberate, could not be so easily written off by the Pentagon and our usually incurious mainstream media.

Doctors without Borders has called the multiple bombardments on the hospital a possible war crime and wants the attack investigated by an international inquiry under the Geneva Conventions. Instead, General John F. Campbell, the American commander in Afghanistan, has appointed a two-star general from another command to head what Campbell termed an independent investigation, a far cry from what Doctors Without Borders has called for.

Keeping the investigation within the military's own house makes it much more likely that we may be heading for one of those mistakes-were-made Pentagon reports, rather than a war-crimes-were-committed report. Even this inadequate, conflicted investigative step, though, is far more than usually happens when

ordinary civilians are killed by U.S. attacks and there are no Westerners or credentialed people to witness them.

John Hanrahan, currently on the editorial board of ExposeFacts, is a former executive director of The Fund for Investigative Journalism and reporter for *“The Washington Post,”* *“The Washington Star,”* UPI and other news organizations. He also has extensive experience as a legal investigator. Hanrahan is the author of *“Government by Contract”* and co-author of *Lost Frontier: The Marketing of Alaska*. He wrote extensively for NiemanWatchdog.org, a project of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University. [This article was originally published by ExposeFacts.org.]

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## Ducking the Issue of ‘Perpetual War’

During last week’s Democratic presidential debate, Sen. Bernie Sanders had an opening to reshape the campaign by offering a thoughtful critique of “perpetual war” and its consequences, but like the other major candidates of both parties ducked this crucial issue, writes Sam Hussein.

By Sam Hussein

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, some of us tried to raise questions about how U.S. foreign policy was a contributing factor. I got my [mic cut off on Bill O’Reilly’s show](#). Others got far worse – a friend basically felt he had to move out of his neighborhood because he was so reviled for criticizing U.S. militarism.

So, the root causes of the 9/11 attacks were hardly discussed – unless it was televangelists Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell blaming gay folks and getting derided for such nonsense. With minimal debate, the United States rushed off to war and hundreds of thousands of people got killed in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere without solving the problem of terrorism.

Today, even as the violence spreads, there’s no meaningful peace movement. Partly as a result of that, we’re not having the serious discussion that we should about what to do after the Paris attacks, including a serious assessment of how U.S. – and Western – foreign policy manifests the hatred that contributes to these homicidal suicide attacks.

In the case of the Paris terror attacks, one might have thought that an intelligent discussion would have been possible – the target, after all, was not the U.S. though it could be next on the list. But, still, there was some

breathing room that might have allowed for a measure of serious examination and reflection about the effects of perpetual war.

But the two-party establishment with no significant exceptions agrees on the need for perpetual war. So there is almost no serious critique. For instance, top Democrats and Republicans show virtually no remorse for having pushed for “regime change” in Syria and Libya. Nor do they see a connection between those policies and the enormous human suffering that followed.

If there is criticism, it is aimed mostly at President Barack Obama for not doing more militarily. He’s called weak and feckless although he’s bombed country after country.

So, amid a broad pro-war consensus on the campaign trail, the major policy debate has turned to Syrian refugees and whether they should be allowed into the United States, a point where there is more disagreement. The trouble is that sometimes what the two sides agree on (perpetual war) is what causes the point that they disagree on (what to do with refugees that perpetual war creates).

Democratic Party politicians talk about the humanity of Syrian refugees and the ideal of the U.S. offering them sanctuary. Republican politicians talk about alleged security concerns from letting refugees in. (While I personally think we should let in more than a mere 10,000 refugees, which is what the Obama administration is talking about, I don’t think that’s the issue we really need to be addressing.)

The real issue is the results of perpetual war and the continued backing for it among those politicians. The Democratic Party participates in perpetual war policies that lead to Syrians becoming refugees and the Republican Party participates in perpetual war policies that lead to greater insecurity for people in the U.S.

Meanwhile, the refugee issue is made into a wedge issue that keeps the Democratic base and the Republican base shouting at each other rather than examining the underlying cause: perpetual war and the problematic “allies” that U.S. officials have embraced in the Mideast. For instance, there is a conspiracy of silence about causal factors, such as the U.S. government’s backing of the authoritarian Saudi regime that has fostered Wahhabism, an extremist form of Islam used by Al Qaeda and ISIS.

Even the most progressive Democrats are silent on this touchy topic. Just this week, Rep. Barbara Lee – possibly the most left-wing member of Congress – was asked on “Democracy Now” about U.S. arms to Saudi Arabia. She didn’t condemn it.

In the presidential race, Sen. Bernie Sanders, the progressive alternative to



hawkish former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, can bring a lump to every throat in the hall when talking about economic inequality, but his solution to the threat from Al Qaeda and ISIS is for the Saudis to “get their hands dirty.”

Sorry, Bernie, but the Saudis hands are dirty enough. The Saudis fostered jihadis like ISIS and Al Qaeda to tear apart Syria, and the Saudis are now bombing Yemen as part of their sectarian war against “the Shiite crescent” slaughtering large numbers of Yemeni civilians (while enabling Al Qaeda’s affiliate in Yemen to capture more territory)

At the CBS-sponsored Democratic debate the day after the Paris attacks, Sanders didn’t even want to talk about foreign policy. It was tragic really. He could have laid into the misguided foreign policy that Clinton has embraced and has helped shape. Sanders could have noted that by backing the Saudis the U.S. has worsened the threat from such groups as ISIS in the Middle East and now Europe and possibly America in the near future. He could have jolted the campaign and sparked a meaningful public debate.

But he didn’t. The most he did was criticize the invasion of Iraq, which is valid, but that was a dozen years ago. In my view, no one who voted for the Iraq War (including Hillary Clinton) is qualified to hold any official position let alone President of the United States, but Sanders flinched at the need for a more substantive critique of what’s happened since the Iraq War.

He relied on his nonsensical and counterproductive talking point about the supposed need for the Saudis and other rich Gulf states to intervene more aggressively in regional conflicts, which in real terms would mean more weapons and money going to their paramilitary proxies: Al Qaeda, ISIS and other jihadists. The Saudis are a big part of the problem, not the solution.

Whatever Sanders has to say about the economy and the need to invest heavily in American infrastructure, education and health care those plans are not feasible unless Sanders also can articulate a path out of perpetual war.

The Vietnam War helped undermine the war on poverty, as Martin Luther King Jr. noted, calling it a “demonic suction tube” diverting tax dollars from programs to alleviate suffering in the United State to inflict suffering in Indochina. Today’s perpetual war is gobbling up so much money that there won’t be any left for building infrastructure and financing other plans that Sanders may have.

Plus, if you don’t explain how and why you would end perpetual war, the voters are going to pick someone who vows to continue perpetual war, only do it better. And there will be no end in sight. Perpetual war will mean more generations of Muslim youth driven to madness against the U.S. and the West.

Beyond the fiscal cost, perpetual war will mean an even more militarized police force at home and a more repressive security state. Perpetual war will mean more refugees who will be treated as the newest scapegoats so the U.S. public will never focus on the U.S. war policies themselves.

Plus, perpetual war will make nuclear war more likely. Even now, we're hearing cavalier talk on the campaign trail with presidential candidates eager to challenge Russian planes over Syria, including Clinton's scheme for a "no-fly zone."

Yet, there's a hunger among many Americans for another course and a revulsion against what the U.S. foreign policy establishment has been selling. The Republican candidates leading in the polls are those who – whatever their other faults – are viewed as being the furthest away from this establishment.

Grassroots groups, like [Come Home America](#), have tried to bring the left and right together against never-ending imperial wars. But elections undercut such movements, with people constantly pushed to focus on symptoms of policies gone wrong, like the Syrian refugee crisis, without looking at the underlying disease, perpetual war.

**Sam Hussein** is communications director for the Institute for Public Accuracy. Follow him on twitter: [@samhusseini](#).

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## The Saudi Connection to Terror

**Exclusive:** While Official Washington devotes much sound and fury to demands for a wider war in Syria and the need to turn away Syrian refugees, Democrats and Republicans dodge the tougher question: how to confront Saudi Arabia about its covert funding for Islamic State and Al Qaeda terrorists, writes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

How does ISIS pay for its operations? This is the key question as the war against the terror organization advances to a new level in the wake of the Paris atrocities. But the mainstream's approved answer is part of the problem.

That approved answer, from many political leaders and assorted "terrorism experts," is that ISIS (also known as ISIL, Islamic State and Daesh) funds its operations through a variety of illicit activities such as illegal antiquity sales, kidnapping for ransom, holding up banks, and peddling crude from oil fields it controls in northern Syria and Iraq.

The line, dutifully parroted by news outlets from *The New York Times* to *The Wall Street Journal* and the *Guardian*, is nothing if not politically convenient. If ISIS is truly self-supporting, then it's essentially self-contained. If so, then all the Western powers have to do once they've sealed it off in its self-proclaimed caliphate is to send in the F-18's and Mirage 2000's to rain down smart bombs and blow it to smithereens.

This is the thinking behind President Barack Obama's unfortunate remarks on Nov. 12. When ABC *This Week* host George Stephanopoulos asked whether ISIS was gaining strength, Obama shot back that it was simply not the case:

"What is true is that from the start, our goal has been first to contain, and we have contained them. They have not gained ground in Iraq. And in Syria they'll come in, they'll leave. But you don't see this systematic march by ISIL across the terrain. What we have not yet been able to do is to completely decapitate their command-and-control structures. We've made some progress in trying to reduce the flow of foreign fighters."

Contain and decapitate this the essence of the U.S. strategy. Hence, the more the Obama administration tries to contain ISIS militarily, the more it puts out word that it is also self-sustaining economically.

But what if it isn't? In fact, there is every reason to be skeptical of the U.S. position and not only because American leaders have been claiming success for close to two decades in various struggles against Islamic terrorism even as it has morphed from a few scattered cells to a vast movement stretching from Nigeria to Bangladesh.

### **Exaggerating the Sums**

So let's start with antiquities. Last year, NBC News breathlessly reported that ISIS was tapping into a \$7 billion underground market in order to finance its operations. "Priceless pieces of history snatched from illicit diggings or swiped from museum cases have become one of the four most common commodities – next to drugs, weapons and human beings – to be trafficked by smugglers," it declared.

But the \$7 billion total is dubious considering that the contemporary art market, entirely above board of course, amounts to only \$2 billion. Black markets are all but impossible to measure for the simple reason that participants scatter like rats as soon as the lights go on.

ISIS's role, moreover, is doubly difficult since it operates under deep cover. But we do know a few things, one of which is that antiquities do not move as easily as, say, corn or wheat. To the contrary, buyers are relatively few and

far between, appraisals are required, and haggling is standard. With so many police snooping around, buyers are especially wary of getting caught funneling money to ISIS. So the role of antiquities would seem to be no more than ancillary.

The same goes for bank heists. Although ISIS was widely credited with making off with \$400 million when it took Mosul, in northern Iraq, in July 2014, *The Financial Times* described the seizure as the biggest heist that “never happened.”

“We speak to the banks there all the time,” it quoted an Iraqi banking official as saying. “We have been informed that all are guarded from the outside by their own guards and that nothing has been removed from the premises of any banks, not even a piece of paper.”

Kidnapping for ransom also seems less than lucrative in an economy inside ISIS-controlled territory that is going increasingly downhill. Ditto local taxation. While illicit oil sales may play an important role, they are also probably not as profitable as believed. Assuming they were filled to the brim, the 116 tanker trucks that U.S. planes destroyed on Monday may have contained a hundred barrels of crude each, oil that, at today’s prices, ISIS would be lucky to sell for around \$30 a barrel. Thus, the damage to the Islamic State’s “treasury” weighs in at a relatively minor \$350,000 or so.

Moreover, ISIS is by now a very large operation. Troop-size estimates start at 20,000 to 31,500 (figures put out by the C.I.A. in September 2014) and go as high as 200,000, although 100,000 seems more plausible. Fighters reportedly earn anywhere from \$350 a month to \$800 or more. These are very imprecise numbers, but at the very least they suggest an organization with a monthly budget in the tens of millions.

So the proceeds from a hundred-odd oil trucks doesn’t explain how ISIS pays its bills. Nor does the speculation about ISIS’s antiquity sales. So if Islamic State does not get the bulk of its funds from such sources, where does the money come from?

### **The Saudi Connection**

The politically inconvenient answer is from the outside, i.e., from other parts of the Middle East where the oil fields are not marginal as they are in northern Syria and Iraq, but, rather, rich and productive; where refineries are state of the art, and where oil travels via pipeline instead of in trucks. It is also a market in which corruption is massive, financial controls are lax, and ideological sympathies for both ISIS and Al Qaeda run strong.

This means the Arab Gulf states of Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, countries with massive reserves of wealth despite a 50-percent plunge in oil prices. The Gulf states are politically autocratic, militantly Sunni, and, moreover, are caught in a painful ideological bind.

Worldwide, Sunnis outnumber Shi'ites by at least four to one. But among the eight nations ringing the Persian Gulf, the situation is reversed, with Shi'ites outnumbering Sunnis by nearly two to one. The more theocratic the world grows and theocracy is a trend not only in the Muslim world, but in India, Israel and even the U.S. if certain Republicans get their way the more sectarianism intensifies.

At its most basic, the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict is a war of succession among followers of Muhammad, who died in the Seventh Century. The more one side gains political control in the name of Islam, consequently, the more vulnerable it becomes to accusations from the other side that its claim to power is less than legitimate.

The Saudi royal family, which styles itself as the "custodian of the two holy mosques" of Mecca and Medina, is especially sensitive to such accusations, if only because its political position seems to be growing more and more precarious. This is why it has thrown itself into an anti-Shi'ite crusade from Yemen to Bahrain to Syria.

While the U.S., Britain and France condemn Bashar al-Assad as a dictator, that's not why Sunni rebels are now fighting to overthrow him. They are doing so instead because, as an Alawite, a form of Shi'ism, he belongs to a branch of Islam that the petro-sheiks in Riyadh regard as a challenge to their very existence.

Civil war is rarely a moderating force, and as the struggle against Assad has intensified, power among the rebels has shifted to the most militant Sunni forces, up to and including Al Qaeda and its even more aggressive rival, ISIS.

In other words, the Islamic State is not homegrown and self-reliant, but a product and beneficiary of larger forces, essentially a proxy, paramilitary army of Gulf state sheiks. Evidence of broad regional support is abundant even if news outlets like *The New York Times* have done their best to ignore it. Some of the highlights of this money trail:

—In a 2009 diplomatic memo made public by Wikileaks, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that "donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide."

(On Thursday, in a hawkish speech to the Council on Foreign Relations, Clinton,

now the frontrunner for the Democratic presidential nomination, focused on her plan for military escalation, including a U.S. invasion of Syria to “impose no-fly zones” and secure what she called a “safe area.” But she added a brief and exasperated reference to the financial reality, saying: “once and for all, the Saudis, the Qataris and others need to stop their citizens from directly funding extremist organizations as well as the schools and mosques around the world that have set too many young people on a path to radicalization.”)

–An August 2012 report by the Defense Intelligence Agency stating that Al Qaeda, Salafists, and the Muslim Brotherhood dominated the Syrian rebel movement and that their goal was to establish a “Salafist principality in eastern Syria” where Islamic State’s caliphate is now located.

–The *Times*’s own report two months earlier stating that the C.I.A. was working with the Muslim Brotherhood to channel Turkish-, Saudi- and Qatari-supplied arms to Sunni rebels in Syria.

–Vice President Joe Biden’s remarkable admission at Harvard’s Kennedy School in October 2014 that “the Saudis, the emirates, etc. were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war [that] they poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad except the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and Al Qaeda.”

–A *Times* editorial just last month complaining that Saudis, Qataris and Kuwaitis were continuing to channel donations to Islamic State.

–Finally, in a front-page article on Friday, the *Times* belatedly acknowledged the devastating DIA report, a mere six months after it was made public by the conservative watchdog group Judicial Watch. But even then, reporter Ian Fisher managed to leave out the most important part, which is that the Salafist stronghold that the Sunnis were seeking to establish is “exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition” i.e. the West, the Gulf states, and Turkey “want in order to isolate the Syrian regime.”

In asserting that there are “many strands of blame” in the ongoing debacle, Fisher managed to criticize everyone except his own paper.

## **Money Talks**

Why is telling the truth so difficult? A big part of the answer is money. Because the U.S., France and other Western powers are dependent on the Gulf states for oil and see the Gulf states as an increasingly important market for high-tech weaponry.

Just last month, the Pentagon announced that it was selling to the Saudis up to four Littoral Combat Ships made by Lockheed for a total of \$11.25 billion, while last week it followed up with the news that it was selling the Saudis \$1.29 billion worth of smart bombs manufactured by Boeing and Raytheon to replace those the kingdom has dropped on Yemen as part of its crusade against the Shi'ite Houthis.

The U.S. thus supplies the Saudis with bombs with which to flatten Yemeni neighborhoods, generate more refugees and, in the process, strengthen "Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula" so that the U.S. can then send in drones to take out a few Al Qaeda operatives.

Everyone makes out arms manufacturers, the Pentagon, Washington politicians like the Clintons who benefit from Saudi largesse, even Al Qaeda, which, while it may lose a few personnel, sees its power grow as a consequence.

Making too big a point about how money from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states is flowing to groups responsible for the carnage in Paris would put at risk this mutual-benefit society. Jeopardizing this lucrative money cycle is something that Washington cannot bear to do, which is why the Obama administration prefers to make ISIS appear to be a self-supporting operation that can be crippled by such military actions as bombing a convoy of oil trucks.

While Europe explodes with xenophobia, the real issue is not the Arabs or Islam, but the "special" U.S.-Saudi relationship which may be even more sacrosanct than the relationship with Israel. It is an alliance that demands of the U.S. that it see, hear and speak no evil about its major Arab partner. Hence, Washington must cover up the real cause of the horrors ranging from the World Trade Center to the Bataclan concert hall to the Syrian civil war.

As long as this U.S.-Saudi "special" relationship continues, the bodies will keep piling up.

**Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace).**

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## The 'War on Terror' Has Been Lost

After 14 years, trillions of dollars spent and hundreds of thousands of people dead with violence expanding, not abating perhaps it's finally time to admit that the Bush-Obama "War on Terror" has been lost and that a new strategy addressing root causes is required, as Nat Parry describes.

By Nat Parry

Last week's attacks in Paris offered a painful and tragic reminder that despite the unprecedented counterterrorism measures implemented since the attacks on New York and Washington 14 years ago, citizens in the West remain as vulnerable as ever to the threat of extremist violence. This may come as a bit of a shock to those who may have expected that the massive investment in fighting terrorism would have resulted in more safety and security by now.

With trillions of dollars spent on overseas military adventures, unprecedented "homeland security" and mass surveillance, and countless lives lost in U.S. wars, it's not unreasonable to have thought that perhaps more measurable progress would have been made in countering the terrorist threat against the United States.

But with transportation agencies, football stadiums and tourist destinations across the U.S. now bolstering security following the attacks in Paris and with the Islamic State, or ISIS, promising more attacks to come in New York and Washington it is clear how vulnerable Americans remain to the threat of jihadist terrorism, despite all these sacrifices over the past decade and a half.

Efforts to contain terrorism certainly had precedents before President George W. Bush declared a wide-ranging and open-ended "War on Terror" in an address to Congress on Sept. 20, 2001, but the groundwork that was set in the weeks and months after 9/11 has come to define the overall approach to this Twenty-first Century challenge an approach that can now clearly be called an abject failure.

Despite some tactical differences between the Bush and Obama administrations in the way the war has been waged with a preference now on drone assassinations, for example, rather than full-scale invasions the "War on Terror" has essentially followed the same logic of pursuing something like total victory by eliminating every terrorist no matter where they are, with an unfortunately high tolerance for killing large numbers of innocent bystanders in the process.

Any honest appraisal of this effort would now conclude that the overall approach has borne out just as badly as the most pessimistic critics asserted back in 2001 and 2002, when the foundation was being laid for what Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld later dubbed the "Long War."

## **Early Critics**

With new organizations forming in the days after 9/11 with slogans such as "war is not the answer," voices were being raised to assert that defeating terrorism required first of all that the United States stop engaging in it, based on the Hippocratic principle of "First do no harm." The U.S. was also urged to devote



at least as much attention to addressing the root causes of violent extremism as it was to addressing the military aspect of defeating jihadists on the battlefield. Among the principal causes identified included fighting global poverty and promoting human rights.

While the Bush administration announced in March 2002 that weapons and U.S. military advisers were being sent to countries such as Indonesia, Nepal, Jordan, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to mount proxy fights against terrorists, development advocates complained that no comparable effort was being made to alleviate the harsh economic conditions that provide the conditions in which extremism flourishes. Human rights organizations also warned that political repression carried out by some U.S. allies was doing more to fuel terrorism than to contain it.

In an open letter to Bush published on March 7, 2002, Human Rights Watch singled out Uzbekistan in particular as being an undeserving ally, urging the U.S. to reconsider its diplomatic and military support for the Central Asian dictatorship. The rights group warned, "In terms of human rights, Uzbekistan is barely distinguishable from its Soviet past, and [Uzbek] President [Islam] Karimov has shown himself to be an unreconstructed Soviet leader. You have to wonder whether this kind of record makes for a trusted ally or a foreign policy burden."

Human Rights Watch also criticized expanding aid to Indonesia, where extra-judicial executions, torture and arbitrary detention were commonplace. It argued that increasing aid to Indonesia would "effectively reward the security forces for bad behavior."

Yet, the Bush administration showed little interest in the correlation between human rights, political repression and militant extremism, a trend that has largely continued through today. In a visit to Central Asia earlier this month, for example, Secretary of State John Kerry met with autocratic rulers and officials from several countries considered some of the world's worst rights offenders.

Although he had been urged by the human rights community to press the leaders on their records, Kerry largely downplayed human rights as he sought deeper U.S. ties with the region. As Reuters reported, "he took pains to avoid direct public criticism as he pursued security and economic concerns at the top of his agenda."

## **Development Agenda**

Back in 2002, when the "War on Terror" was being rolled out, calls for more

engagement on development aid grew louder, with some of the strongest pleas coming directly from World Bank President James Wolfensohn.

In a speech at the Woodrow Wilson International Center, Wolfensohn argued that to combat terrorism, global poverty and other international problems must be addressed. "We will not create a safer world with bombs or brigades alone," he said. Poverty "can provide a breeding ground for the ideas and actions of those who promote conflict and terror."

Yet, when it comes to fighting global poverty, the U.S. has continued to display a seeming indifference to making this a priority, whether as part of a larger campaign against violent extremism or simply on humanitarian grounds.

Despite pressure placed on the U.S. following 9/11 to make development aid a central plank in the broader campaign against terrorism, the Bush administration resisted calls to increase funding for aid to the world's poorest nations. Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill insisted that foreign aid wasn't proven to be effective, and so the U.S. blocked efforts by Great Britain and other countries to raise the level of aid going from international development organizations to poor nations.

After sustained criticism, the Bush administration reluctantly announced an increase in aid by \$5 billion spread over several years. This would represent only a modest rise, however, in the U.S. contribution as measured by its percentage of GDP, which at that time was only 0.1 percent far short of the 0.7 percent that the United Nations had set for the minimal target of industrialized countries.

The UN has explained its 0.7 target as the minimum necessary towards promoting international security and stability, and has urged that meeting this target be considered a requisite for membership on the UN Security Council. For what it's worth, however, current development aid by the United States stands at just 0.19 percent of its GDP, far behind the global leaders of Norway and Sweden, which donate 1.07 percent and 1.03 percent of their GDPs, respectively.

### **Climate Change Connection**

Besides poverty and human rights, tackling climate change also emerged as an issue related closely to countering the long-term terrorist threat, but for years this connection was essentially ignored by high-level policymakers. While President Obama has just recently prioritized climate change, the Council on Foreign Relations for one was warning as far back as 2007 that climate change was contributing significantly to the terrorist threat.

The report noted for example that "declining food production, extreme weather

events, and drought from climate change could further inflame tensions in Africa, weaken governance and economic growth, and contribute to massive migration and possibly state failure, leaving 'ungoverned spaces' where terrorists can organize."

These concerns have since been reiterated by everyone from the Pentagon, which calls climate change a "threat multiplier" because it "has the potential to exacerbate many of the challenges we are dealing with today from infectious disease to terrorism," to Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, who recently stated that "climate change is directly related to the growth of terrorism."

Although Sanders was attacked for allegedly overstating a "direct" relationship between global warming and terrorism, there is indeed a mountain of evidence to support the assertion that there is at least a very strong correlation between these two trends.

In fact, it is well-documented that the current conflict in Syria, which has facilitated the rise of ISIS, was triggered by a series of socio-economic, political and environmental factors, including climate change. According to a recent report called "A New Climate for Peace," an independent study commissioned by the foreign ministers of the G7 nations, a severe drought that hit Syria in 2006 was exacerbated by resource mismanagement and the impact of climate change on water and crop production.

"Herders in the northeast lost nearly 85 percent of their livestock, affecting 1.3 million people," the report explained. "Nearly 75 percent of families that depend on agriculture suffered total crop failure."

The widespread loss of livelihoods and food sources compelled farmers and rural families to migrate to overcrowded cities, stressing urban infrastructure and basic services, and increasing urban poverty. "More than 1 million people were food insecure, adding substantial pressure to pre-existing stressors, such as grievances and government mismanagement," the G7 report pointed out. "This food insecurity was one of the factors that pushed the country over the threshold into violent conflict."

## **U.S. Interventions**

This violent conflict in turn was aggravated by previous and ongoing American meddling in the region. As the U.S. intelligence community had warned in 2006, a whole new generation of Islamic radicalism was spawned by the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. The consensus view of 16 U.S. spy services was that "the Iraq war has made the overall terrorism problem worse." Part of this problem

becoming worse was the rise of ISIS, which emerged in Iraq as a direct result of the U.S. occupation.

The *Washington Post* reported in April 2015 that the core of ISIS is primarily made up of ex-Baathist military officials who were summarily disbanded from the Iraqi Army following the U.S. invasion. The organization grew largely thanks to the sectarian policies of U.S.-backed Prime Minister Nouri Maliki in stripping power from the Sunnis in favor of Shiite militias. The early growth of ISIS was further facilitated by the mass detentions of Iraqis in prisons such as Camp Bucca, which provided a fertile networking and recruiting opportunity.

As journalist Glenn Greenwald explained the process on Thursday's episode of Democracy Now, "the reason there is such a thing as ISIS is because the U.S. invaded Iraq and caused massive instability, destroyed the entire society, destroyed all of the infrastructure, destroyed all order, and it was in that chaos that ISIS was able to emerge."

After finally withdrawing from a devastated and traumatized Iraq in 2010, the U.S. then turned its attention to Libya, and decided to overthrow the government of Muammar Gaddafi through a massive bombing campaign. Following Gaddafi's ouster, his caches of weapons ended up being shuttled to rebels in Syria, fueling the civil war there. The U.S. also began directly arming groups attempting to overthrow Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, with these weapons often ending up in the hands of jihadists such as the al-Nusra Front and ISIS.

Some of this was done in the full expectation that the policies would result in emboldening the extremists of groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda. According to a classified 2012 U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency memorandum, extremists were the driving forces in the Syrian civil war. As the memo stated, "the Salafists, the Muslim Brotherhood and [al-Qaeda in Iraq] are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria."

And yet, the U.S. was helping coordinate arms transfers to these same groups, leading directly to the rise of Islamic extremism there. These policies later morphed into efforts to promote "moderate rebels," with no more success.

A \$500 million Pentagon program meant to train and support moderate fighters was abandoned earlier this year after news emerged that the first group of U.S.-trained Syrian fighters was handily defeated by al-Nusra in late July. The Islamists apparently attacked the group and took an unspecified number hostage, with the remaining fighters fleeing and still unaccounted for.

Congressional hawks like Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, withdrew their support for the program just a year after Congress authorized it. "It's a bad, bad sick

joke,” said McCain of the program, while Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Connecticut, called it “a bigger disaster than I could have ever imagined.”

### **‘Do You Realize What You’ve Done?’**

These counter-productive strategies have not gone unnoticed by some world leaders, most of whom however are too polite to bring up the failures in public settings. One who does not play along by these unspoken diplomatic rules though is Russian President Vladimir Putin. In his address to the United Nations General Assembly in September, he directly challenged the architects of these policies, in what was surely seen in Washington as a major breach of etiquette.

“It would suffice to look at the situation in the Middle East and North Africa,” Putin said before the world. “Certainly political and social problems in this region have been piling up for a long time, and people there wish for changes naturally.”

He continued: “But how did it actually turn out? Rather than bringing about reforms, an aggressive foreign interference has resulted in a brazen destruction of national institutions and the lifestyle itself. Instead of the triumph of democracy and progress, we got violence, poverty and social disaster. Nobody cares a bit about human rights, including the right to life.”

He then issued a direct appeal to U.S. policymakers: “I cannot help asking those who have caused the situation, do you realize now what you’ve done? But I am afraid no one is going to answer that. Indeed, policies based on self-conceit and belief in one’s exceptionality and impunity have never been abandoned.”

As Putin suggested, there is little indication that much will change considering the recent past, with the central logic of the “War on Terror” having endured for 14 years now with no signs of it being revised in any substantial way.

In his address to Congress on Sept. 20, 2001, Bush declared that “Our war on terror begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated” a general policy that seems to remain in place today.

What we have seen transpire since Bush laid out his plan is precisely what many warned would happen: as one terrorist group is “defeated,” another one pops up to fill the void, a cycle that could conceivably go on forever, and by definition would doom the United States to a state of war and retribution for eternity. And although Obama has at times attempted to reassure Americans that the war was drawing to an end, his assurances often did more to confuse than to clarify.

## Curious Memorial Day 'Victory' Speech

Last May, for example, Obama marked Memorial Day by noting that it was the first one since 9/11 that America was celebrating without being involved in a "major ground war."

"For many of us, this Memorial Day is especially meaningful," Obama said at Arlington National Cemetery on May 25. "It is the first since our war in Afghanistan came to an end. Today is the first Memorial Day in 14 years that the United States is not engaged in a major ground war."

The statement made headlines as a milestone in the U.S.'s post-9/11 war footing a de facto declaration by the U.S. president that, perhaps, the war is over. But, as some media outlets pointed out, there was an element of disingenuousness to the announcement.

"American troops remain mired and at risk in [Iraq and Afghanistan], training and advising Iraqi forces against the Islamic State and Afghan forces fighting the Taliban," noted the *Washington Post*.

Reuters pointed out that "U.S. forces are now involved in air campaigns against Islamic State militants in Iraq and Syria as well as training missions in Iraq and Afghanistan," noting however that Obama has been "reluctant to relaunch ground operations in Iraq."

Nevertheless, at the time Obama announced this milestone in winding down the "War on Terror," 3,000 American military personnel were in Iraq working with the Iraqi army and U.S. airstrikes continued to pound ISIS targets. About 14,000 bombs had been dropped on Iraq and Syria since Sept. 2014, killing an estimated 12,500 fighters, according to Pentagon sources and hundreds of civilians, according to independent monitors.

In Afghanistan, although the end of combat operations was formally announced last December, American forces "are playing a direct combat role" in secretive raids against al-Qaeda targets, *The New York Times* reported in February 2015.

In March 2015, it was announced that the United States will maintain nearly 10,000 service members in Afghanistan at least until 2016. This of course was revised again just last month, when Obama seemingly abandoned his longstanding goal of ending the war in Afghanistan, saying that he would leave 5,500 U.S. forces in the country beyond his departure from office in January 2017.

With all this in mind, Obama's statement on Memorial Day earlier this year may have raised more questions than it answered. For one thing, what does "major" mean? Is saying that we are not in a "major ground war" an acknowledgement that

the U.S. is no longer at war, or is it a tacit confirmation that we are in a minor ground war? If we are not at war, does that mean we are in a state of peace? If so, can pre-9/11 civil liberties, constitutional principles and privacy rights be restored, or are those gone for good?

Of course, all of these questions assume that terms like “war and peace” still have some commonly understood meanings, which is a dubious assumption 14 years into this ill-defined war. While some of us may retain memories of periods of relative peace, these are not memories that can be expected of all Americans.

Indeed, an entire generation of young people has now come of age in the era of the “War on Terror.” To put this into perspective: the 18-year-olds currently enlisting in the United States Armed Forces and being deployed to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban or being sent to Guantanamo to guard the prisoners who continue to languish there were just preschoolers when the Twin Towers came crashing down, and can scarcely remember a time at which their country was not “at war.”

While many Americans might still consider the not-so-new normal of war, militaristic displays at sporting events, routine scapegoating of Muslims, and the relinquishing of individual privacy and civil liberties to be somehow “weird,” to millions of young people, there is nothing weird about it.

While some of us may expect or quietly hope for a return to a time of peace, a time when we can expect both personal safety and individual liberty, it is sobering to realize that this expectation cannot possibly exist for those born and bred in this environment. After all, how can people expect to return to a normalcy that they have never known?

The sad fact is, normalcy to many Americans now means precisely this atmosphere of permanent war, militarism and hyper-security. But perhaps even sadder is that the tradeoff that we have been expected to make in terms of sacrificing blood and treasure in exchange for security and peace of mind now increasingly appears to be a false promise, a mirage on the horizon that always seems to disappear the further we travel across the desert of the “War on Terror.”

**Nat Parry is the co-author of *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush.* [This story originally appeared at Essential Opinion, <https://essentialopinion.wordpress.com/2015/11/20/the-bject-failure-of-the-war-on-terror/>]**

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# Hard Lessons from Paris Attack

In Official Washington, the talk is all about expanded wars and how tough to be on Syrian refugees. But elsewhere there is some serious reflection on how the West went wrong in its approach toward the Middle East, as reflected in Dennis J Bernstein's interview with Indian historian Vijay Prashad.

By Dennis J Bernstein

After the Paris terror attacks and a bloody hostage standoff in Mali, the focus has been on the West's plans to "intensify" the war against Islamic terrorists, especially the Islamic State (or ISIS), but some more thoughtful thinkers are calling for a critical examination of the past mistakes made and the lessons that can be learned.

For instance, Vijay Prashad, an Indian historian, journalist and commentator, warned against "clichéd policies" that could make the violence worse. Prashad spoke in an interview with Pacifica Radio host Dennis J Bernstein.

DB: Vijay Prashad writes, "A week of horrible carnage, bomb blasts in Beirut and Baghdad, then the cold-blooded shootings in Paris. Each of these acts of terror left dead bodies and wounded lives. There is nothing good that comes of them, only the pain of the victim, and then more pain, as powerful people take refuge in clichéd policies that once again turn the wheel of violence."

Meanwhile the BBC announced, "France is committed to destroying the so-called Islamic State group after last Friday's deadly attacks. President Francois Hollande has said France's military campaign against ISIS and Iraq will intensify." Imagine, intensify. Vijay, what is your overview?

VP: These attacks have been horrible. There's been an intensification of ISIS attacks – the one in Paris was part of a sequence. The reaction from the French president is to be expected. There's a kind of political grammar that he's forced to fall in line with. Two words apply here – you have to "do something," and you have to appear strong.

*Something* and *strong* are the key words in order to understand the French reaction just as we are to understand the US reaction after 9/11. There's no worked out strategy after 15 months of U.S. and Gulf air bombing Iraq and then Syria. The rollback, particularly in Syria, has been minimal. The French now want to intensify that. They had been part of the coalition previously, so there's nothing new here. It's the same strategy, which is not bringing dividends. On the other hand, it's producing acts of terror. I'm afraid the prognosis is very poor for what Francois Hollande is recommending.



DB: You have some suggestions for the French president. What are they?

VP: First, grieve for those who have been killed. Grief is important for a family, neighborhood, city, country, and the planet. There are terrible stories, and each one should be told. A 41-year-old woman at a cafe was shot in Paris. In Beirut, a four-month-old baby was sitting in his mother's lap. She cushioned the blow. Mother and father died, and the baby lived.

These stories are educational. They tell us who the victims of these terror attacks are. There was the killing by drones of an entire family in Yemen. We need to know their names – their lives – so that people don't just see them as statistics. First we need an accounting of who they are, and then grieve for them.

Secondly, states need to not believe that a response to a terrorist action is military force. They need to believe that it's got to be forensic. One needs to understand how this happened. How is it possible that the Turkish government handed over the names of one of these terrorists to the French – not once, but twice? Apparently, it was not acted upon.

These are the kinds of questions that were not asked after 9/11. The 9/11 Commission ducked many serious questions about how people on a watch list were not discovered. It's the same thing with any terrorist action, whether it's 9/11 or the Oklahoma City bombing. These were known characters on a certain list. We're supposed to have this enormous surveillance, but instead of forensic surveillance, we have blanket surveillance. Everybody's emails are checked. There needs to be a proper police accounting of what occurred.

DB: I like the next suggestion: Try to get to the root of the issue to what provoked the inhumanity. This is one the U.S. and the West aren't particularly interested in.

VP: We used to joke that somebody needs to tell the CIA that highlighter pens are yellow and not black. The 9/11 Commission did some accounting of the reason it occurred, but most of the 9/11 report was entirely blacked out, particularly the section that involved Saudi Arabia and its involvement – not the country, but individual sheiks. There needs to be a very serious and honest appraisal, not only of the culpability of people in the Arabian Peninsula, but also in the French and American government.

Just this year, the French government sent \$10 billion of arms to Saudi Arabia. The U.S. and Western Europe rely on Saudi oil money – not the oil itself, but the profits – to liquefy their banks. There's extreme complicity of the West with the Gulf Arab states. So any accounting of where this vicious ideology

spawns from, who finances the network of mullahs, some of these extremist groups – none of that is taken in hand.

Friends in Paris tell me that when a mosque is searching for a new cleric, often the government insists the cleric not be from the community, but they must be brought in from abroad. Often some Saudi-trained cleric arrives, so people feel these clerics are foisted upon them. This is the nature of the accounting that's necessary. You can't just say they are bad guys, ISIS. It's much deeper than that, because our complicity is quite considerable in these cases.

DB: Do you think U.S. and Western terrorism in the Middle East is the driving force behind growing acts of terrorism against the West? They tried to put a cork in Allah's mouth, and the whole world blew up?

VP: There's a lot of truth to what you are saying. There are different timelines by which you can sketch that story backwards, such as to the Iraq war of 2003. Now it's widely understood that the regime change in Iraq had a catastrophic impact on the region. It essentially produced the space for ISIS to grow, and brought us to where we are.

But we can go earlier, to the way the West and the Gulf Arab states first collaborated to send the mujahedeen to Afghanistan. This was also a regime change in process, where we financed anybody, mostly the most conservative and heinous forces on the ground. We legitimized them, gave them training, and then were surprised when out of the kernel of Afghanistan, Al Qaeda erupted.

Before that, in the 1950s, the U.S. collaborated with the Saudis, largely, to attack Arab nationalism, undermining and destroying the Left by promoting very virulent forms of Islam, pushed by the Saudis in particular. There's a lot to be said about the role of the West in producing the social conditions which lead to ISIS. Many serious questions must be asked about the role Saudi Arabia has played in West Asia and across the Muslim world, with its collaborators in Morocco and elsewhere, pushing a very heartless politics against the social democratic politics that had emerged from the people of the Arab lands.

DB: The more I see how the Saudis operate, the more it reminds me of Israel.

VP: The last UN report that came out from the Economic and Social Commission of West Asia addressed the sense of the Arab Spring, and stressed the importance of what happened in Tunisia. Then the report made a startling comparison. It had a section where it went after states that promote a kind of moral, ethnic, religious culture where there's no cultural diversity allowed or sanctified by the state.

The countries it used as an example were Israel and Saudi Arabia. The report

suggested that these two countries are creating an anachronistic form of nation vote for the world, and are not a good example for the region. Of course, Israel is furious with the comparison, because it prefers to be compared to European states, and would hate to be compared to Saudi Arabia. But there's something to be said for the way in which Israel is increasingly showing a very narrow understanding of ethnic or religious nationalism. If you were very uncharitable, you might call it racist nationalism.

DB: Where does this go now? Do you see a light at the end of the tunnel?

VP: There is the phrase, "May we always live in interesting times." In an essay I wrote after the Paris shootings, I call these pitiless times times without pity. We are going to prosecute a ruthless, pitiless war. Our political leadership, across the planet, has the imagination of yesterday. They don't want to see new ways of doing things, or acknowledge we are dealing with people, not aliens who can be smashed out of existence.

We need creative thinking. In Syria, as an example, all understand the West is trapped in a web of its relationships. Turkey is on one side, which understands terrorism to include the Kurds. The Kurdish fighters have been some of the most successful fighters against ISIS. Here's a major U.S. ally, and NATO member, which wants to attack the Assad government in Damascus, and the Kurds.

The Americans have been giving close air support to the Kurds against ISIS. Meanwhile, the U.S. is so compromised with the Saudis that it's unable to pressure the Saudis to back down from their proxies. We live in an age where the politics is yesterday – they are not able to look forward. [On Nov. 15], Obama and Putin had a private discussion for 35 minutes. My only hope is that they don't do more damage than they've already done. Our current political leadership is not capable of rolling back the damage, but we should have faith that they will not make it worse than it is already.

DB: After the Charlie Hebdo killing in Paris, we had the insanity of Netanyahu marching in the streets of Paris in solidarity with the people of France after he had slaughtered some 2,200 people, including many children. They say no peace in Palestine, no peace anyplace else in the world.

VP: In 2003, it was very gratifying to see India, Brazil and South Africa take a very strong position against the American war in Iraq. Then in 2011, the five BRICS countries happened to comprise the UN Security Council [BRICS is the acronym for an association of five major emerging national economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. The grouping was originally known as "BRIC" before the inclusion of South Africa in 2010].

Sadly, Russia, China, India and Brazil abstained when the West and the Gulf Arab states wanted to bomb Libya. Only South Africa voted in favor, and President Jacob Zuma said that Obama personally called him to convince him to vote yes. So the five BRICS countries essentially allowed the West and Gulf Arabs to destroy Libya.

Now we have an extraordinarily introspective BRICS bloc, particularly India, Brazil, South Africa and China. The four of them seriously regret their vote about Libya. Unfortunately they've gone silent, but my hope is that these four countries will assert themselves on the global stage, and argue that the approach the West has taken has been catastrophic, and another way must be put forward. Thus far they haven't had the confidence to articulate an alternative, but I very much hope that these countries, which are very chastised by the vote in 2011, might now come out and say the West doesn't have all the answers.

**Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of *Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom*. You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net).**

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## Tangled Threads of US False Narratives

**Exclusive:** Official Washington's many false narratives about Russia and Syria have gotten so tangled that they have become a danger to the struggle against Sunni jihadist terrorism and conceivably a threat to the future of the planet, a risk that Robert Parry explores.

By Robert Parry

One way to view Official Washington is to envision a giant bubble that serves as a hothouse for growing genetically modified "group thinks." Most inhabitants of the bubble praise these creations as glorious and beyond reproach, but a few dissenters note how strange and dangerous these products are. Those critics, however, are then banished from the bubble, leaving behind an evermore concentrated consensus.

This process could be almost comical as the many armchair warriors repeat What Everyone Knows to Be True as self-justifying proof that more and more wars and confrontations are needed but the United States is the most powerful nation on earth and its fallacious "group thinks" are spreading a widening arc of chaos and death around the globe.

We even have presidential candidates, especially among the Republicans but

including former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, competing to out-bellicose each other, treating an invasion of Syria as the least one can do and some even bragging about how they might like to shoot down a few Russian warplanes.

Though President Barack Obama has dragged his heels regarding some of the more extreme proposals, he still falls in line with the “group think,” continuing to insist on “regime change” in Syria (President Bashar al-Assad “must go”), permitting the supply of sophisticated weapons to Sunni jihadists (including TOW anti-tank missiles to Ahrar ash-Sham, a jihadist group founded by Al Qaeda veterans and fighting alongside Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front), and allowing his staff to personally insult Russian President Vladimir Putin (having White House spokesman Josh Earnest in September demean Putin’s posture for sitting with his legs apart during a Kremlin meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu).

Not surprisingly, I guess, Earnest’s prissy disapproval of what is commonly called “man spread” didn’t extend to Netanyahu who adopted the same open-leg posture in the meeting with Putin on Sept. 21 and again in last week’s meeting with Obama, who it should be noted sat with his legs primly crossed.

This combination of tough talk, crude insults and reckless support of Al Qaeda-connected jihadis (“our guys”) apparently has become *de rigueur* in Official Washington, which remains dominated by the foreign policy ideology of neoconservatives, who established the goal of “regime change” in Iraq, Syria and Iran as early as 1996 and haven’t changed course since. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “How Neocons Destabilized Europe.”]

## **Shaping Narratives**

Despite the catastrophic Iraq War based on neocon-driven falsehoods about WMD and the complicit unthinking “group think” the neocons retained their influence largely through an alliance with “liberal interventionists” and their combined domination of major Washington think tanks, from the American Enterprise Institute to the Brookings Institution, and the mainstream U.S. news media, including The Washington Post and The New York Times.

This power base has allowed the neocons to continue shaping Official Washington’s narratives regardless of what the actual facts are. For instance, a Post editorial on Thursday repeated the claim that Assad’s “atrocities” included use of chemical weapons, an apparent reference to the now largely discredited claim that Assad’s forces were responsible for a sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013.

After the attack, there was a rush to judgment by the U.S. State Department

blaming Assad's troops and leading Secretary of State John Kerry to threaten retaliatory strikes against the Syrian military. But U.S. intelligence analysts refused to sign on to the hasty conclusions, contributing to President Obama's last-minute decision to hold off on a bombing campaign and to accept Putin's help in negotiating Assad's surrender of all Syrian chemical weapons (though Assad still denied a role in the sarin attack).

Subsequently, much of the slapdash case for bombing Syria fell apart. As more evidence became available, it increasingly appeared that the sarin attack was a provocation by Sunni jihadists, possibly aided by Turkish intelligence, to trick the United States into destroying Assad's military and thus clearing the way for a Sunni jihadist victory.

We now know that the likely beneficiaries of such a U.S. attack would have been Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and the spinoff known as the Islamic State (also called ISIS, ISIL or Daesh). But the Obama administration never formally retracted its spurious sarin claims, thus allowing irresponsible media outlets, such as The Washington Post, to continue citing the outdated "group think."

The same Post editorial denounced Assad for using "barrel bombs" against the Sunni rebels who are seeking to overthrow his secular government, which is viewed as the protector of Syria's minorities including Christians, Alawites and Shiites who could face genocide if the Sunni extremists prevail.

Though this "barrel bomb" theme has become a favorite talking point of both the neocons and liberal "human rights" groups, it's never been clear how these homemade explosive devices shoved out of helicopters are any more inhumane than the massive volumes of "shock and awe" ordnance, including 500-pound bombs, deployed by the U.S. military across the Middle East, killing not only targeted fighters but innocent civilians.

Nevertheless, the refrain "barrel bombs" is accepted across Official Washington as a worthy argument for launching devastating airstrikes against Syrian government targets, even if such attacks clear the way for Al Qaeda's allies and offshoots gaining control of Damascus and unleashing even a worse humanitarian cataclysm. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Obama's Ludicrous 'Barrel Bomb' Theme.](#)"]

### **False-Narrative Knots**

But it is now almost impossible for Official Washington to disentangle itself from all the false narratives that the neocons and the liberal hawks have spun in support of their various "regime change" strategies. Plus, there are few people left inside the bubble who even recognize how false these narratives are.

So, the American people are left with the mainstream U.S. news media endlessly

repeating storylines that are either completely false or highly exaggerated. For instance, we hear again and again that the Russians intervened in the Syrian conflict promising to strike only ISIS but then broke their word by attacking Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and "our guys" in Sunni jihadist forces armed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and the CIA.

Though you hear this narrative everywhere in Official Washington, no one ever actually quotes Putin or another senior Russian official promising to strike only at ISIS. In all the quotes that I've seen, the Russians refer to attacking "terrorists," including but not limited to ISIS.

Unless Official Washington no longer regards Al Qaeda as a terrorist organization a trial balloon that some neocons have floated then the Putin-lied narrative makes no sense, even though every Important Person Knows It to Be True, including Obama's neocon-leaning Defense Secretary Ashton Carter.

The U.S. political and media big shots also mock the current Russian-Iranian proposal for first stabilizing Syria and then letting the Syrian people decide their own leadership through internationally observed democratic elections.

Okay, you might say, what's wrong with letting the Syrian people go to the polls and pick their own leaders? But that just shows that you're a Russian-Iranian "apologist" who doesn't belong inside the bubble. The Right Answer is that "Assad Must Go!" whatever the Syrian people might think.

Or, as the snarky neocon editors of The Washington Post wrote on Thursday, "Mr. Putin duly dispatched his foreign minister to talks in Vienna last weekend on a Syrian political settlement. But Moscow and Tehran continue to push for terms that would leave Mr. Assad in power for 18 months or longer, while, in theory, a new constitution is drafted and elections organized. Even a U.S. proposal that Mr. Assad be excluded from the eventual elections was rejected, according to Iranian officials."

In other words, the U.S. government doesn't want the Syrian people to decide whether Assad should be kicked out, an odd and contradictory stance since President Obama keeps insisting that the vast majority of Syrians hate Assad. If that's indeed the case, why not let free-and-fair elections prove the point? Or is Obama so enthralled by the neocon insistence of "regime change" for governments on Israel's "hit list" that he doesn't want to take the chance of the Syrian voters getting in the way?

### **Reality Tied Down**

But truth and reality have become in Official Washington something like Gulliver being tied down by the Lilliputians. There are so many strands of lies and

distortions that it's impossible for sanity to rise up.

Another major factor in America's crisis of false narratives relates to the demonizing of Russia and Putin, a process that dates back in earnest to 2013 when Putin helped Obama sidetrack the neocon dream of bombing Syria and then Putin compounded his offense by assisting Obama in getting Iran to constrain its nuclear program, which derailed another neocon dream to bomb-bomb-bomb Iran.

It became ominously clear to the neocons that this collaboration between the two presidents might even lead to joint pressure on Israel to finally reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians, a possibility that struck too close to the heart of neocon thinking which, for the past two decades, has favored using "regime change" in nearby countries to isolate and starve Lebanon's Hezbollah and Palestinian groups, giving Israel a free hand to do whatever it wished.

So, this Obama-Putin relationship had to be blown up and the point of detonation was Ukraine on Russia's border. Official Washington's false narratives around the Ukraine crisis are now also central to neocon/liberal-hawk efforts to prevent meaningful coordination between Obama and Putin in countering ISIS and Al Qaeda in Syria and Iraq.

Inside Official Washington's bubble, the crisis in Ukraine is routinely described as a simple case of Russian "aggression" against Ukraine, including an "invasion" of Crimea.

If you relied on The New York Times or The Washington Post or the major networks that repeat what the big newspapers say, you wouldn't know there was a U.S.-backed coup in February 2014 that overthrew the elected Ukrainian government of Viktor Yanukovich, even after he agreed to a European compromise in which he surrendered many powers and accepted early elections.

Instead of letting that agreement go forward, right-wing ultra-nationalists, including neo-Nazis operating inside the Maidan protests, overran government buildings in Kiev on Feb. 22, 2014, causing Yanukovich and other leaders to flee for their lives.

Behind the scenes, U.S. officials, such as neocon Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, had collaborated in the coup plans and celebrated the victory by Nuland's handpicked leaders, including the post-coup Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, whom she referred to in an earlier intercepted phone call as "Yats is the guy."

Nor would you know that the people of Crimea had voted overwhelmingly for President Yanukovich and after the coup voted overwhelmingly to get out of the failed Ukrainian state and reunify with Russia.



The major U.S. news media twists that reality into a Russian “invasion” of Crimea even though it was the strangest “invasion” ever because there were no photos of Russian troops landing on the beaches or parachuting from the skies. What the Post and the Times routinely ignored was that Russian troops were already stationed inside Crimea as part of a basing agreement for the Russian fleet at Sevastopol. They didn’t need to “invade.”

And Crimea’s referendum showing 96 percent approval for reunification with Russia though hastily arranged was not the “sham” that the U.S. mainstream media claimed. Indeed, the outcome has been reinforced by various polls conducted by Western agencies since then.

### **The MH-17 Case**

The demonization of Putin reached new heights after the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine killing all 298 people onboard. Although substantial evidence and logic point to elements of the Ukrainian military as responsible, Official Washington’s rush to judgment blamed ethnic Russian rebels for firing the missile and Putin for supposedly giving them a powerful Buk anti-aircraft missile system.

That twisted narrative often relied on restating the irrelevant point that the Buks are “Russian-made,” which was used to implicate Moscow but was meaningless since the Ukrainian military also possessed Buk missiles. The real question was who fired the missiles, not where they were made.

But the editors of the Post, the Times and the rest of the mainstream media think you are very stupid, so they keep emphasizing that the Buks are “Russian-made.” The more salient point is that U.S. intelligence with all its satellite and other capabilities was unable both before and after the shoot-down to find evidence that the Russians had given Buks to the rebels.

Since the Buk missiles are 16-foot-long and hauled around by slow-moving trucks, it is hard to believe that U.S. intelligence would not have spotted them given the intense surveillance then in effect over eastern Ukraine.

A more likely scenario of the MH-17 shoot-down was that Ukraine moved several of its Buk batteries to the frontlines, possibly fearing a Russian airstrike, and the operators were on edge after a Ukrainian warplane was shot down along the border on July 16, 2014, by an air-to-air missile presumably fired by a Russian plane.

But after rushing out a white paper five days after the tragedy pointing the finger at Moscow the U.S. government has refused to provide any evidence or intelligence that might help pinpoint who fired the missile that brought down

MH-17.

Despite this remarkable failure by the U.S. government to cooperate with the investigation, the mainstream U.S. media has found nothing suspicious about this dog not barking and continues to cite the MH-17 case as another reason to despise Putin.

How upside-down this “Everything Is Putin’s Fault” can be was displayed in a New York Times “news analysis” by Steven Erlanger and Peter Baker on Thursday when all the “fundamental disagreements” between Obama and Putin were blamed on Putin.

“Dividing them are the Russian annexation of Crimea and its meddling in eastern Ukraine, Moscow’s efforts to demonize Washington and undermine confidence in NATO’s commitment to collective defense, and the Kremlin’s support of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria,” Erlanger and Baker wrote.

### **Helping ISIS**

This tangle of false narratives is now tripping up the prospects of a U.S.-French-Russian-Iranian alliance to take on the Islamic State, Al Qaeda and other Sunni jihadist forces seeking to overthrow Syria’s secular government.

The neocon Washington Post, in particular, has been venomous about this potential collaboration which while possibly the best chance to finally resolve the horrific Syrian conflict would torpedo the neocons’ long-held vision of imposed “regime change” in Syria.

In editorials, the Post’s neocon editors also have displayed a stunning lack of sympathy for the 224 Russian tourists and crew killed in what appears to have been a terrorist bombing of a chartered plane over the Sinai in Egypt.

On Nov. 7, instead of expressing solidarity, the Post’s editors ridiculed Putin and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi for not rushing to a judgment that it was an act of terrorism, instead insisting on first analyzing the evidence. The Post also mocked the two leaders for failing to vanquish the terrorists.

Or as the Post’s editors put it: “While Mr. Putin suspended Russian flights on [Nov. 6], his spokesman was still insisting there was no reason to conclude that there had been an act of terrorism. While Western governments worried about protecting their citizens, the Sissi and Putin regimes were focused on defending themselves.

“Both rulers have sold themselves as warriors courageously taking on the Islamic State and its affiliates; both are using that fight as a pretext to accomplish

other ends, such as repressing peaceful domestic opponents and distracting attention from declining living standards. On the actual battlefield, both are failing.”

Given the outpouring of sympathy that the United States received after the 9/11 attacks and the condolences that flooded France over the past week, it is hard to imagine a more graceless reaction to a major terrorist attack against innocent Russians.

As for the Russian hesitancy to jump to conclusions earlier this month, that may have been partially wishful thinking but it surely is not an evil trait to await solid evidence before reaching a verdict. Even the Post’s editors admitted that U.S. officials noted that as of Nov. 7 there was “no conclusive evidence that the plane was bombed.”

But the Post couldn’t wait to link the terrorist attack to “Mr. Putin’s Syrian adventure” and hoped that it would inflict on Putin “a potentially grievous political wound.” The Post’s editors also piled on with the gratuitous claim that Russian officials “still deny the overwhelming evidence that a Russian anti-aircraft missile downed a Malaysian airliner over Ukraine last year.” (There it is again, the attempt to dupe Post readers with a reference to “a Russian anti-aircraft missile.”)

The Post seemed to take particular joy in the role of U.S. weapons killing Syrian and Iranian soldiers. On Thursday, the Post wrote, “Syrian and Iranian troops have lost scores of Russian-supplied tanks and armored vehicles to the rebels’ U.S.-made TOW missiles. Having failed to recapture significant territory, the Russian mission appears doomed to quagmire or even defeat in the absence of a diplomatic bailout.”

### **Upping the Ante**

The neocons’ determination to demonize Putin has upped the ante, turning their Mideast obsession with “regime change” into a scheme for destabilizing Russia and forcing “regime change” in Moscow, setting the stage for a potential nuclear showdown that could end all life on the planet.

To listen to the rhetoric from most Republican candidates and Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton, it is not hard to envision how all the tough talk could take on a life of its own and lead to catastrophe. [See, for instance, Philip Giraldi’s [review](#) of the “war with Russia” rhetoric free-flowing on the campaign trail and around Official Washington.]

At this point, it may seem fruitless even naive to suggest ways to pierce the various “group thinks” and the bubble that sustains them. But a counter-argument

to the fake narratives is possible if some candidate seized on the principle of an informed electorate as vital to democracy.

An argument for empowering citizens with facts is one that transcends traditional partisan and ideological boundaries. Whether on the right, on the left or in the center, Americans don't want to be treated like cattle being herded by propaganda or "strategic communication" or whatever the latest euphemism is for deception and manipulation.

So, a candidate could do the right thing and the smart thing by demanding the release of as much U.S. intelligence information to cut this Gordian knot of false narratives as possible. For instance, it is way past time to declassify the 28 pages from the congressional 9/11 report addressing alleged Saudi support for the hijackers. There also are surely more recent intelligence estimates on the funding of Al Qaeda's affiliates and spin-offs, including ISIS.

If this information embarrasses some "allies" such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey so be it. If this history makes some past or present U.S. president look bad, so be it. American elections are diminished, if not made meaningless, when there is no informed electorate.

A presidential candidate also could press President Obama to disclose what U.S. intelligence knows about other key turning points in the establishment of false narratives, such as what did CIA analysts conclude about the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin attack and what do they know about the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of MH-17.

The pattern of the U.S. government exploiting emotional moments to gain an edge in an "info-war" against some "enemy" and then going silent as more evidence comes in has become a direct threat to American democracy and in regards to nuclear-armed Russia possibly the planet.

Legitimate secrets, such as sources and methods, can be protected without becoming an all-purpose cloak to cover up whatever facts don't fit with the desired propaganda narrative that is then used to whip the public into some mindless war frenzy.

However, at this point in the presidential campaign, no candidate is making transparency an issue. Yet, after the deceptions of the Iraq War and with the prospects of another war based on misleading or selective information in Syria and potentially a nuclear showdown with Russia it seems to me that the American people would respond positively to someone treating them with the respect deserving of citizens in a democratic Republic.

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