

Local Forces Who Defeated ISIS in Syria Defend Their Territory

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

A Wise and Rare Decision

By [As'ad AbuKhalil](#)

Special to Consortium News



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

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

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

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

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

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

Exaggerations of US Role

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

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

While it can’t be determined mathematically the extent to

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

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

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

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

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

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

Presidents Obey the Military

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Honduras Again in the Balance

The initial Honduran election returns looked promising for the progressive challenger but the vote count has since stalled and the authoritarian incumbent sent troops into the streets to stop protests, as Dennis J Bernstein reports.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The future of Honduras hangs in the balance as the vote count from presidential election drags on. The challenger, Salvador Nasralla, a former sportscaster running at the head of a progressive left-leaning alliance, initially held the lead over incumbent President Juan Orlando Hernández but that was reversed amid allegations of ballot manipulation and the imposition of a military curfew to prevent protests.

A win by Nasralla would represent an across-the-board rejection of Hernández's iron-fisted rule.

Dana Frank, professor of history at the University of California, Santa Cruz, said, "The Honduran elections, especially President Juan Orlando Hernández's criminal candidacy in violation of the Honduran Constitution, continue to underscore the utter breakdown of the rule of law in Honduras since the 2009 coup – with the blessing of the U.S. government, which continues to celebrate a regime thoroughly marked by corruption and the vicious repression of basic civil liberties. Reports from the Honduran government claiming that the crime rate is down or that the police have been cleaned up should not be believed for a minute."

I spoke to Assistant Professor Suyapa Portillo of Pitzer College on Nov. 27. Portillo and her students were international observers in San Pedro Sula in Honduras and visited over 13 voting centers throughout the most marginalized sectors of the city.

Dennis Bernstein: Could you just remind us who the candidates are in this latest election in Honduras? There does seem to be a big difference between them.

Suyapa Portillo: The candidates are Salvador Nasralla, who is running for the Opposition Alliance, and Juan Orlando Hernández, the current president.

Actually, it is illegal for Hernández to run for reelection in Honduras. After the coup d'état, bipartisanship was partly broken and there were actually ten parties running in the north where I was an observer.

It was a very heated race but the electoral college reported around 1:40 am that about 45% of the electorate had voted for Nasralla and 40% for Hernández. But because the current president controls the entire system, including the electoral college, he hasn't conceded the election to Nasralla, which would be typical by this point. It still is not clear whether Hernández is going to respect the constitution.

Dennis Bernstein: Talk a little about the stark differences between the candidates. We have heard a lot about the violence in Honduras after the coup, which was supported by the United States government.

Suyapa Portillo: The National Alliance has been in power since the coup d'état in 2009. Since then, the crime rate has risen to an extreme degree. Over 200 environmental activists have been killed and about that many LGBT activists. Journalists and human rights defenders are facing threats if they stand up against the government. A lot of the improvements in Honduras after the peace accords in the 1980's are being rolled back by the National Alliance. People in Honduras consider Hernández a dictator. Even though he claims that crime has been reduced, what has really happened is that it is less reported on. Hernández's brother is one of the first high profile people to be linked to narco-trafficking.

Dennis Bernstein: We know that the US government, led by Hillary Clinton [as Secretary of State], sustained the coup that drove [former President] Zelaya out of the country [in 2009]. Clinton bragged about this in the first edition of her autobiography.

Suyapa Portillo: In Honduras narco-traffickers and gangs are taking over. The levels of violence are through the roof. We are seeing attacks against human rights defenders, organizers, feminists. Honduras deserves a different form of government. When Hillary Clinton bragged about the coup d'état and when the Obama administration refused to call this a coup d'état, they really set in motion all these murders.

Dennis Bernstein: Was this an important election? Did people really want to get out and vote? You take a risk when you vote in Honduras, particularly if you are a grassroots activist, a teacher, etc.

Suyapa Portillo: The entire country was militarized, particularly the city centers. We visited thirteen voting centers in San Pedro Sula, in some of the most marginalized sections of the city where people expected the most violence. There was a lot of energy and enthusiasm despite all the militarization. People voted early, went home and then came back for the vote count. This participation by the citizenry is new, emerging after the coup d'état. Every

ballot box had its own count.

We did see quite a few discrepancies: people showing up to learn that they had already voted, people coming to vote to find that their pictures were not available. We saw a lot of tension between the ballot box people and the electoral college controlled by the government and the citizens. Some of the neighborhoods we visited are controlled by gangs, but the people still came out.

In almost all of the thirteen voting centers we visited, Nasralla clearly had the lead.

Dennis Bernstein: How do you account for this enthusiasm? You talked a little about the violence in the country which ensued after the coup. But talk about some of the grassroots struggles that have gotten people out in numbers to vote.

Suyapa Portillo: 2014 saw the formation of the military police, a body that had not existed since the eighties. This puts military-grade weapons in the urban centers. When Hernández came into power, he granted 300 mining concessions to local elites and foreign companies and people felt he was giving away the country. These land concessions came into direct conflict with indigenous communities. You started to see incredible numbers of murders of human rights defenders and land rights defenders.

Dennis Bernstein: Some feel he is trying to turn the country into a free trade zone.

Suyapa Portillo: The Nationalist Party vision is just to get rich off of the people. There are no increases in minimum wage, there is no way out for people. In fact, in 2014 we saw an exodus of unaccompanied minors. There is really no future for young people in Honduras. Education is impossible to access without money. The military police have attacked university students organizing for reform.

And Hernández has put his entire family in office. All the ministers are his brothers, sisters, cousins—which is again something that hadn't happened since the 1980's in Honduras. Most importantly, there are no jobs. The economy is not growing.

Dennis Bernstein: The US government would know about the trafficking in Honduras because the United States has an extensive presence there. So there is nothing that would be a secret to the US.

Suyapa Portillo: The United States knows that there is impunity, that no human rights charges will ever see the light of day. Oftentimes, plaintiffs are either killed or leave before cases are resolved. Remember that Honduras was under military rule from 1963 to 1980. For most Hondurans this is recent

history and they don't want to return to that.

The young people want a president who will represent them and the issues that they care about. Libre and the New Alliance have a proposal that makes sense to them. The activists we saw were remarkably young people.

Dennis Bernstein: This disastrous policy initiated by Obama and Clinton and intensified under Trump has led to a surge of people leaving the country. It is sort of a cynical policy because you have got various politicians in the US lecturing mothers in Honduras and El Salvador how dangerous it is to send their kids up north and yet we are creating the circumstances for extreme suffering and very little choice.

Suyapa Portillo: If people cannot make ends meet, they will migrate. We have to also remember the history of corporations in Honduras. The United Fruit Company and Dole used to provide jobs for people along the north coast and then when the hurricanes hit factories were closed and unions were lost.

New, non-union, exploitative corporations are now coming in, which is also pushing people out. Along the north coast, just about every family has someone living in the United States. The government has to have a plan for dealing with immigration. What kind of policies will make people want to stay, rather than risk the very dangerous journey through Mexico?

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.

Hillary Clinton Keeps Pointing Fingers

Hillary Clinton blames others for last year's electoral defeat, never recognizing that many Americans – both Democrats and Republicans – found her public record appalling, as Dennis J Bernstein discusses with John Pilger.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Because of the failure of the corporate press to report fully on Hillary Clinton's policy failures throughout her career, it was difficult for voters to perceive how dangerous her presidency might have been, although many Democratic voters bolted to Bernie Sanders and enough Americans voted against her last

November to give Donald Trump his narrow Electoral College victory.

In the following conversation with the legendary filmmaker and muckraking journalist John Pilger, we leap off from his recent article regarding Clinton's new book and her recent appearance on Australian Broadcasting (ABC).

In the interview, I delve with Pilger into the career of Clinton as a hawkish U.S. senator who continued her interventionism as Secretary of State, not only voting for the Iraq War in 2002 but protecting the 2009 coup in Honduras and pressing for the "regime change" war in Libya that turned the once-prosperous country into a failed state. She also chuckled at the news of the rape-murder of deposed Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

Dennis Bernstein: Hillary Clinton has been featured on Australian Media to talk about her new book and apparently to blame anyone and everyone for the fact that she lost the election to Donald Trump.

John Pilger: Actually, the interview I wrote about was conducted in New York but it was broadcast by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on their flagship current affairs program called "Four Corners." The interviewer was someone with a reputation for hard-hitting interviews named Sarah Ferguson. I thought it was an extraordinary display of Clinton's attempting to justify herself after all these months.

When I was in New York recently I read quite a few interviews conducted by female reporters with Hillary Clinton in which she was portrayed as a feminist and therefore all else should be set aside if not forgiven. This was what came across in the Sarah Ferguson interview. It opens with "your pain seemed almost visceral, describe your pain to us." It was as if she were being invited to lie on a therapist's couch instead of being interviewed. This has run right through interviews with Clinton by women journalists. The whole question of identity politics has such potency now that a corrupt politician who deceived and abused the electorate can be held up as a martyr.

There is nothing in the interview, for example, about why she described ordinary Americans who might have voted for Trump as "irredeemable and deplorable."

Nothing about how she earned from Goldman Sachs speeches a total of about \$670,000, displaying the sort of greed that upset ordinary people in the US.

And of course there is the central issue of the emails leaked by WikiLeaks, which showed how involved Clinton has been with the whole violent, corrupt world of the Gulf and jihadism. The very people backing jihadism, especially Saudi Arabia, were donating large sums to the Clinton Foundation. All this is missing from this and other interviews. It shows how the power of identity politics can

eclipse the facts. There was even a photograph I saw in New York of a reporter with her arm around Clinton, consoling her.

Dennis Bernstein: The feeling you get in watching this whole thing unfold is that this is a full-court press to distract from the content of the released emails.

John Pilger: It is very easy to distract attention from something if you simply don't mention it. I have always felt that the most virulent form of censorship is censorship by omission. The whole nefarious state of the Clintons and the Clinton Foundation is simply left out of these interviews. Hillary Clinton is able to plead a kind of special case for herself because she is a woman and a feminist.

Dennis Bernstein: After this interview with the Australian Broadcasting Company, the producer referred to Julian Assange as "Putin's bitch."

John Pilger: The producer re-tweeted a troll message to advertise the interview with Clinton, and especially the component in which she defames Julian Assange. You have to remember, this is the state broadcaster in Australia, which is Julian Assange's country. Assange pointed out that the ABC's code was meant to prevent this kind of bias. It was a particularly bad interview but in a sense it was also a very typical one. It allowed a figure of great power and contention to say anything she wanted to say without challenge.

There was no mention of Libya in all of this. Libya was *Hillary Clinton's invasion*. It was Hillary Clinton who famously rejoiced on camera the gruesome murder of Colonel Gaddafi. 40,000 people died in this criminal US and NATO invasion. None of this was mentioned, no solidarity with the women who died.

There is no solidarity with the women who will suffer as a result of the coup in Honduras, which Clinton signed off on as secretary of state. Simply to make an exception of women like Hillary Clinton because she is a woman and would have been the first female president of the United States seems to me to be a very powerful form of censorship what we should be aware of.

Dennis Bernstein: Hillary Clinton *laughed* at Qaddafi's on-camera assassination. She thought that was funny. She bragged about sustaining the coup in Honduras over the opposition of all the presidents in Central America, which has now led to Honduras being the murder capital of the world.

John Pilger: Her notoriety should be clear in the public consciousness. There she is on video saying, "[We] came, [we] saw, he died." Gaddafi was murdered publicly with a knife. His convoy, which was trying to escape from Libya, was only intercepted because NATO aircraft identified where it was. She gloated at

the murder of this man. We should be enlightening people as to the corrupt and very violent nature of individuals such as Hillary Clinton. We are letting the public down if we buy into these identity politics stereotypes. I am sure there are many feminists who find Hillary Clinton and what she has done appalling. But the media still present this woman as something very different from Trump. The grotesqueness of Trump has allowed many liberals in the United States to put aside the fact that Hillary Clinton really is the embodiment of a corrupt system.

A companion piece to censorship is double standards. With Hillary Clinton, it is an incandescent double standard. Many feminists foolishly went along with her call to support the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 on the premise that it would free the women of Afghanistan from the Taliban. Actually, it changed the position of women very little but it caused a great deal of suffering in that country.

What we are seeing is an important issue—that of identity politics—being used as a cover for violent invasions of other countries. In the Australian interview the interviewer fed her the question, “How much damage did Julian Assange do to you personally?” Her answer was that she had a lot of history with him because she was secretary of state when WikiLeaks published a lot of very important information from our State Department and Defense Department. What Clinton failed to say, and what the interviewer failed to ask her, was that in 2010 WikiLeaks revealed that Clinton had ordered a secret intelligence campaign targeted at the United Nations leadership. This intelligence operation, signed by Clinton, went after things like credit card passwords and forensic details about the communication systems used by UN officials. It was by any measure totally lawless spying.

Dennis Bernstein: There is every indication that these key emails were leaked by someone at Democratic party headquarters who was upset that Hillary and the Democratic leadership undermined Bernie Sanders’ bid for the nomination.

John Pilger: I had a long, filmed interview with Julian Assange one year ago and I asked him outright where the Podesta emails had come from, if they had come from Russia, and he said no. It seems to me that there is every likelihood that these emails were the result of what you just described. Clinton really cut the ground from beneath Sanders. We know that the emails are completely authentic.

They expose the Clinton Foundation and its greed and how important Saudi Arabia was to Hillary Clinton. After Saudi Arabia and Qatar had donated generously to the Clinton Foundation, Clinton as secretary of state approved the biggest arms sales in history, something like a total of \$80 billion. As a result, total US arms sales to the world doubled. That is big business, that is big war-making,

and I would say that is big corruption.

Dennis Bernstein: It is not an exaggeration to say that she was a warmonger, that she was someone who embraced war.

John Pilger: Yes, she was. All the polls during the election campaign last year indicated that Clinton and Trump were two of the most despised candidates to ever run for president. I suppose the people's memory of that has been clouded over by the awful presence of Trump.

Dennis Bernstein: Anyone concerned about the plight of Palestinians has to recall Operation Cast Lead—which killed around 2,200 people, including about 500 children, with the bombing of schools and hospitals. When Clinton was asked about that, she said, “Israel has the right to defend itself.”

John Pilger: Compared to Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, Trump is a bit of a wimp. After Obama was elected and before he was inaugurated, he was on vacation in Hawaii where he met with members of his National Security and Defense Department team and he approved support for Israel's attack on Gaza. So Obama's first foreign policy act was to approve Israel's onslaught on the people of Gaza. I think that wondering whether a politician like Clinton will ever do something requiring strong principles and a sense of social justice is really very naive. We have to see these people for what they are. Both Clinton and Trump are a symptom of the system and people must start concentrating on the system and how to change it.

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.

Clinton Still Hides Her Speeches

After serving as Secretary of State and before starting her run for President, Hillary Clinton amassed millions of dollars in speaking fees from big banks and corporate interests with business before the federal government – and she won't say what she said, as Marjorie Cohn points out.

By Marjorie Cohn

Hillary Clinton refuses to make public the transcripts of her speeches to big banks, three of which were worth a total of \$675,000 to Goldman Sachs. She says

she would release the transcripts “if everybody does it, and that includes Republicans.” After all, she complained, “Why is there one standard for me, and not for everybody else?”

As the New York Times editorial board pointed out, “The only different standard here is the one Mrs. Clinton set for herself, by personally earning \$11 million in 2014 and the first quarter of 2015 for 51 speeches to banks and other groups and industries.”

Hillary Clinton is not running in the primaries against Republicans, who, the Times noted, “make no bones about their commitment to Wall Street deregulation and tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans.” She is running against Bernie Sanders, “a decades-long critic of Wall Street excess who is hardly a hot ticket on the industry speaking circuit,” according to the Times.

Why do voters need to know what Hillary told the banks? Because it was Wall Street that was responsible for the 2008 recession, making life worse for most Americans. We need to know what, if anything, she promised these behemoths. There is an old saying: I Scratch Your Back, You Scratch Mine.

Clinton has several super PACs, which have recently donated \$25 million to her campaign, \$15 million of which came from Wall Street. Big banks and large contributors don’t give their money away for nothing. They expect that their interests will be well served by those to whom they donate.

Clinton recently attended an expensive fundraiser at Franklin Square Capital, a hedge fund that gives big bucks to the fracking industry. Two weeks later, her campaign announced her continuing support for the production of natural gas, which comes from fracking.

Sanders opposes fracking. He said, “Just as I believe you can’t take on Wall Street while taking their money, I don’t believe you can take on climate change effectively while taking money from those who would profit off the destruction of the planet.”

Bernie’s “Political Revolution”

Sanders has no super PACs. His campaign has received 4 million individual contributions, that average \$27 each. Perhaps Rupert Murdoch multiplied that amount by \$100 in setting \$2,700 a head as the entrance fee for Clinton’s latest campaign gala?

Sanders has called for a “political revolution” that “takes on the fossil fuel billionaires, accelerates our transition to clean energy, and finally puts people before the profits of polluters.” He would retrain workers in the fossil

fuel industries for clean energy jobs.

Sanders reminds us that the top one-tenth of 1 percent owns nearly as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent, and 99 percent of all new income goes to the top 1 percent. Unlike Clinton, he says healthcare is a right – not a privilege – and college and university tuition should be free.

Sanders and Congressman John Conyers introduced legislation to allocate \$5.5 billion to states and communities to create employment programs for African-American youth. They say, “instead of putting military style equipment into police departments . . . we [should] start investing in jobs for the young people there who desperately need them.”

How will we pay for all that? “If we cut military spending and corporate welfare, we would have more than enough money to meet America’s needs,” Sanders wrote in his 1997 book, *Outsider in the House*. “This nation currently spends \$260 billion a year on defense, even though the Cold War is over,” not counting “\$30 billion spent annually on intelligence or the \$20 billion in defense-related expenditures hidden away in our federal spending on energy,” he added.

Today, with all the wars our government is prosecuting, that figure is nearly \$600 billion.

Marjorie Cohn is a professor at Thomas Jefferson School of Law and former president of the National Lawyers Guild. Her most recent book is *Drones and Targeted Killing: Legal, Moral, and Geopolitical Issues*. Follow her on twitter at @marjoriecohn.

The US Hand in Libya’s Tragedy

Exclusive: Some 900 people from Libya may have died when their boats capsized in the Mediterranean Sea as they fled the barbaric chaos that the Obama administration helped unleash in Libya in 2011. Yet, the mainstream U.S. media has amnesia about the bloody American hand in this tragedy, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The mainstream U.S. news media is lambasting the Europeans for failing to stop the humanitarian crisis unfolding in the Mediterranean Sea as desperate Libyans flee their war-torn country in overloaded boats that are sinking as hundreds drown. But the MSM forgets how this Libyan crisis began, including its own key role along with that of “liberal interventionists” such as Hillary Clinton and

Samantha Power.

In 2011, it was all the rage in Official Washington to boast about the noble “responsibility to protect” the people of eastern Libya who supposedly were threatened with extermination by the “mad man” Muammar Gaddafi. We also were told endlessly that, back in 1988, Gaddafi’s agents had blown Pan Am 103 out of the skies over Lockerbie, Scotland.

The R2Pers, led by then-National Security Council aide Power with the backing of Secretary of State Clinton, convinced President Barack Obama that a “humanitarian intervention” was needed to prevent Gaddafi from slaughtering people whom he claimed were Islamic terrorists.

As this U.S.-orchestrated bombing campaign was about to begin in late March 2011, Power told a New York City audience that the failure to act would have been “extremely chilling, deadly and indeed a stain on our collective conscience.” Power was credited with steeling Obama’s spine to press ahead with the military operation.

Under a United Nations resolution, the intervention was supposed to be limited to establishing no-fly zones to prevent the slaughter of civilians. But the operation quickly morphed into a “regime change” war with the NATO-led bombing devastating Gaddafi’s soldiers who were blown to bits when caught on desert roadways.

Yet, the biggest concern in Official Washington was a quote from an Obama’s aide that the President was “leading from behind” with European warplanes out front in the air war when America’s war hawks said the United States should be leading from the front.

At the time, there were a few of us who raised red flags about the Libyan war “group think.” Though no one felt much sympathy for Gaddafi, he wasn’t wrong when he warned that Islamic terrorists were transforming the Benghazi region into a stronghold. Yes, his rhetoric about exterminating rats was over the top, but there was a real danger from these extremists.

And, the Pan Am 103 case, which was repeatedly cited as the indisputable proof of Gaddafi’s depravity, likely was falsely pinned on Libya. Anyone who dispassionately examined the 2001 conviction of Libyan agent Ali al-Megrahi by a special Scottish court would realize that the case was based on highly dubious evidence and bought-and-paid-for testimony.

Megrahi was put away more as a political compromise (with a Libyan co-defendant acquitted) than because his guilt was proven beyond a reasonable doubt. Indeed, by 2009, the conviction was falling apart. Even a Scottish appeals court

expressed concern about a grave miscarriage of justice. But Megrahi's appeal was short-circuited by his release to Libya on compassionate grounds because he was suffering from terminal prostate cancer.

Yet the U.S. mainstream media routinely called him "the Lockerbie bomber" and noted that the Libyan government had taken "responsibility" for the bombing, which was true but only because it was the only way to get punitive sanctions lifted. The government, like Megrahi, continued to proclaim innocence.

A Smirking MSM

During those heady days of bombing Libya in 2011, it also was common for the MSM to smirk at the notion that Megrahi was truly suffering from advanced prostate cancer since he hadn't died as quickly as some doctors thought he might. Then, in September 2011, after Gaddafi's regime fell, Megrahi's family invited the BBC and other news organizations to see Megrahi struggling to breathe in his sick bed.

His son, Khaled al-Megrahi, said, "I know my father is innocent and one day his innocence will come out." Asked about the people who died in the Pan Am bombing, the son said: "We feel sorry about all the people who died. We want to know who did this bad thing. We want to know the truth as well."

But it was only after Megrahi died on May 20, 2012, that some elements of the MSM acknowledged grudgingly that they were aware of the many doubts about his conviction all along. The New York Times' obituary carried a detailed account of the evidentiary gaps that were ignored both during the trial in 2001 and during the bombing of Libya in 2011.

The Times noted that "even some world leaders" saw Megrahi "as a victim of injustice whose trial, 12 years after the bombing, had been riddled with political overtones, memory gaps and flawed evidence. Investigators, while they had no direct proof, believed that the suitcase with the bomb had been fitted with routing tags for baggage handlers, put on a plane at Malta and flown to Frankfurt, where it was loaded onto a Boeing 727 feeder flight that connected to Flight 103 at London, then transferred to the doomed jetliner."

Besides the lack of proof supporting that hypothesis was the sheer implausibility that a terrorist would assume that an unattended suitcase could make such an unlikely trip without being detected, especially when it would have been much easier to sneak the suitcase with the bomb onto Pan Am 103 through the lax security at Heathrow Airport outside London.

The Times' obit also noted that during the 85-day trial, "None of the witnesses connected the suspects directly to the bomb. But one, Tony Gauci, the Maltese

shopkeeper who sold the clothing that forensic experts had linked to the bomb, identified Mr. Megrahi as the buyer, although Mr. Gauci seemed doubtful and had picked others in photo displays.

“The bomb’s timer was traced to a Zurich manufacturer, Mebo, whose owner, Edwin Bollier, testified that such devices had been sold to Libya. A fragment from the crash site was identified by a Mebo employee, Ulrich Lumpert. Neither defendant testified. But a turncoat Libyan agent testified that plastic explosives had been stored in [Megrahi’s co-defendant’s] desk in Malta, that Mr. Megrahi had brought a brown suitcase, and that both men were at the Malta airport on the day the bomb was sent on its way.”

In finding Megrahi guilty, the Scottish court admitted that the case was “circumstantial, the evidence incomplete and some witnesses unreliable,” but concluded that “there is nothing in the evidence which leaves us with any reasonable doubt as to the guilt” of Megrahi.

However, the evidence later came under increasing doubt. The Times wrote: “It emerged that Mr. Gauci had repeatedly failed to identify Mr. Megrahi before the trial and had selected him only after seeing his photograph in a magazine and being shown the same photo in court. The date of the clothing sale was also in doubt.” Scottish authorities learned, too, that the U.S. Justice Department paid Gauci \$2 million for his testimony.

As for the bomb’s timer, the Times noted that the court called Bollier “untruthful and unreliable” and “In 2007, Mr. Lumpert admitted that he had lied at the trial, stolen a timer and given it to a Lockerbie investigator. Moreover, the fragment he identified was never tested for residue of explosives, although it was the only evidence of possible Libyan involvement.

“The court’s inference that the bomb had been transferred from the Frankfurt feeder flight was also cast into doubt when a Heathrow security guard revealed that Pan Am’s baggage area had been broken into 17 hours before the bombing, a circumstance never explored. Hans KÃ¶chler, a United Nations observer, called the trial ‘a spectacular miscarriage of justice,’ words echoed by [South African President Nelson] Mandela.”

In other words, Megrahi’s conviction looked to have been a case of gross prosecutorial misconduct, relying on testimony from perjurers and failing to pursue promising leads (like the possibility that the bomb was introduced at Heathrow, not transferred from plane to plane to plane). And those problems were known prior to Megrahi’s return to Libya in 2009 and prior to the U.S.-supported air war against Gaddafi in 2011.

Yet, Andrea Mitchell at MSNBC and pretty much everyone else in the MSM repeated endlessly that Megrahi was “the Lockerbie bomber” and that Libya was responsible for the atrocity, thus further justifying the “humanitarian intervention” that slaughtered Gaddafi’s soldiers and enabled rebel militias to capture Tripoli in summer 2011.

Al-Qaeda Hotbed

Similarly, there was scant U.S. media attention given to evidence that eastern Libya, the heart of the anti-Gaddafi rebellion, indeed was a hotbed for Islamic militancy, with that region supplying the most per-capita militants fighting U.S. troops in Iraq, often under the banner of Al-Qaeda.

Despite that evidence, Gaddafi’s claim that he was battling Islamic terrorists in the Benghazi region was mocked or ignored. It didn’t even matter that his claim was corroborated by a report from U.S. analysts Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman for West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center.

In their report, “Al-Qaeda’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq,” Felter and Fishman analyzed Al-Qaeda documents captured in 2007 showing personnel records of militants who flocked to Iraq for the war against the Americans. The documents showed eastern Libya providing a surprising number of suicide bombers who traveled to Iraq to kill American troops.

Felter and Fishman wrote that these so-called Sinjar Records disclosed that while Saudis comprised the largest number of foreign fighters in Iraq, Libyans represented the largest per-capita contingent by far. Those Libyans came overwhelmingly from towns and cities in the east.

“The vast majority of Libyan fighters that included their hometown in the Sinjar Records resided in the country’s Northeast, particularly the coastal cities of Darnah 60.2% (53) and Benghazi 23.9% (21),” Felter and Fishman wrote, adding that Abu Layth al-Libi, Emir of Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), “reinforced Benghazi and Darnah’s importance to Libyan jihadis in his announcement that LIFG had joined al-Qaeda.”

Some important Al-Qaeda leaders operating in Pakistan’s tribal regions also were believed to have come from Libya. For instance, “Atiyah,” who was guiding the anti-U.S. war strategy in Iraq, was identified as a Libyan named Atiyah Abd al-Rahman.

It was Atiyah who urged a strategy of creating a quagmire for U.S. forces in Iraq, buying time for Al-Qaeda Central to rebuild its strength in Pakistan. “Prolonging the war [in Iraq] is in our interest,” Atiyah said in a letter that upbraided Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi for his hasty and reckless

actions in Iraq.

After U.S. Special Forces killed Al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011, in Pakistan, Atiyah became al-Qaeda's second in command until he himself was reportedly killed in a U.S. drone strike in August 2011. [See Consortiumnews.com "[Time Finally Ran Out for Atiyah.](#)"]

However, to most Americans who rely on the major U.S. news media, little of this was known, as the Washington Post itself acknowledged in an article on Sept. 12, 2011, after Gaddafi had been overthrown but before his murder. In an article on the rise of Islamists inside the new power structure in Libya, the Post wrote:

"Although it went largely unnoticed during the uprising that toppled Gaddafi last month, Islamists were at the heart of the fight, many as rebel commanders. Now some are clashing with secularists within the rebels' Transitional National Council, prompting worries among some liberals that the Islamists, who still command the bulk of fighters and weapons, could use their strength to assert an even more dominant role."

On Sept. 15, 2011, the New York Times published a similar article, entitled "[Islamists' Growing Sway Raises Questions for Libya.](#)" It began: "In the emerging post-Qaddafi Libya, the most influential politician may well be Ali Sallabi, who has no formal title but commands broad respect as an Islamic scholar and populist orator who was instrumental in leading the mass uprising. The most powerful military leader is now Abdel Hakim Belhaj, the former leader of a hard-line group once believed to be aligned with Al Qaeda."

Belhaj was previously the commander of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, which was associated with Al-Qaeda in the past, maintained training bases in Afghanistan before the 9/11 attacks, and was listed as a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department.

Belhaj and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group denied continued allegiance to Al-Qaeda, but Belhaj was captured during George W. Bush's post-9/11 "war on terror" and was harshly interrogated by the CIA at a "black site" prison in Thailand before being handed over to Gaddafi's government which imprisoned and Belhaj claims tortured him.

The Times reported that "Belhaj has become so much an insider lately that he is seeking to unseat Mahmoud Jibril, the American-trained economist who is the nominal prime minister of the interim government, after Mr. Jibril obliquely criticized the Islamists."

The Times article by correspondents Rod Nordland and David D. Kirkpatrick also cited other signs of growing Islamist influence inside the Libyan rebel

movement: “Islamist militias in Libya receive weapons and financing directly from foreign benefactors like Qatar; a Muslim Brotherhood figure, Abel al-Rajazk Abu Hajar, leads the Tripoli Municipal Governing Council, where Islamists are reportedly in the majority.”

It may be commendable that the Post and Times finally gave serious attention to this consequence of the NATO-backed “regime change” in Libya, but the fact that these premier American newspapers ignored the Islamist issue as well as doubts about Libya’s Lockerbie guilt while the U.S. government was whipping up public support for another war in the Muslim world raises questions about whether those news organizations primarily serve a propaganda function.

Gaddafi’s Brutal Demise

Even amid these warning signs that Libya was headed toward bloody anarchy, the excited MSM coverage of Libya remained mostly about the manhunt for “the madman” Muammar Gaddafi. When rebels finally captured Gaddafi on Oct. 20, 2011, in the town of Sirte and sodomized him with a knife before killing him Secretary of State Clinton could barely contain her glee, joking in one interview: “We came, we saw, he died.”

The months of aerial slaughter of Gaddafi’s soldiers and Gaddafi’s own gruesome death seemed less amusing on Sept. 11, 2012, when Islamic terrorists overran the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, killing U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other U.S. diplomatic personnel. In the two-plus years since, Libya has become a killing ground for rival militias, including some now affiliated with the Islamic State.

As the BBC reported on Feb. 24, 2015, the Islamic State “has gained a foothold in key towns and cities in the mostly lawless North African state [Libya], prompting Egypt – seeing itself as the bulwark against Islamists in region – to launch air strikes against the group.

“IS has launched its most high-profile attacks in Libya, bombing an upmarket hotel in the capital, Tripoli, in January, and releasing a video earlier this month showing the beheading of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians it had kidnapped. On 20 February, it killed at least 40 people in a suicide bombing in the eastern town of al-Qubbah.”

Now, the chaos that the U.S.-sponsored “regime change” unleashed has grown so horrific that it is causing desperate Libyans to climb into unseaworthy boats to escape the sharp edges of the Islamic State’s knives and other depredations resulting from the nationwide anarchy.

Thus, Libya should be a powerful lesson to Hillary Clinton, Samantha Power and

the other R2Pers that often their schemes of armed “humanitarianism” can go badly awry and do much more harm than good. It should also be another reminder to the MSM to question the arguments presented by the U.S. government, rather than simply repeating those dubious claims and false narratives.

But neither seems to be happening. The “liberal interventionists” like their neoconservative allies remain unchastened, still pumping for more “regime change” wars, such as in Syria. Yet, many of these moral purists are silent about the slaughter of ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine, Palestinians in Gaza, or now Houthis and other Yemenis dying under Saudi bombs in Yemen.

It appears the well-placed R2Pers in the Obama administration are selective in where that “responsibility to protect” applies.

Samantha Power, now serving as U.S. ambassador to the UN, remains the same self-righteous scold denouncing human rights abuses in places where there are American-designated “bad guys” while looking the other way in places where the killing is being done by U.S. “allies.” As for Hillary Clinton, she is already being touted as the presumptive Democratic nominee for President.

Meanwhile, the MSM has conveniently forgotten its own propaganda role in revving up the war on Libya in 2011. So, instead of self-reflection and self-criticism, the mainstream U.S. media is filled with condemnations of the Europeans for their failure to respond properly to the crisis of some 900 Libyans apparently drowning in a desperate attempt to flee their disintegrating country.

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](#).
