

Aleppo: The Frenzied Media Response and the Stakes for Syria

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Like a demon possessed, the U.S. propaganda machine went into overdrive last week. Their primary targets: Syria, Russia and Iran.

On Dec. 13, Ambassador Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, spoke to the UN Security Council to condemn the three countries: “Are you truly incapable of shame? Is there literally nothing that can shame you? Is there no act of barbarism against civilians, no execution of a child that gets under your skin, that just creeps you out a little bit? Is there nothing you will not lie about or justify?”

Since when did one of the chief representatives of empire and war become a spokesperson for the 17 million plus people of Syria? When does the world get to ask Power — an advocate for the wars against Iraq and Libya, and interventions across Africa — if she has any shame for the deadly barbarism of her pet projects, and to hold her accountable for them?

Due to the intense imperialist demonization campaign of the Syrian and Russian governments, there is a lot of confusion among the U.S. public — and even among people who consider themselves leftists and socialists. Groups are holding vigils to denounce “the Syrian government’s killing of innocent men women and children” and to condemn Western governments for not “doing more” to stop what they call a “genocide.”

There are a lot of good, antiwar-minded people across the U.S. again falling for the dominant Pentagon and CIA-sponsored narrative.

It is imperative for progressive-minded people to take a step back and critically evaluate what is happening.

Outrage as a political weapon

The main so-called “neutral” source for these reports was Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, the UN human rights commissioner. Never mentioned was the fact that Al Hussein is a Jordanian Prince, the cousin of King Abdullah II, and former Jordanian Ambassador to the United States. Jordan has provided vital logistical support to CIA operations in Syria, arming and training rebel groups there. The UN General Secretary, by contrast, called the reports of civilian massacres “unverified” but that distinction was glossed over, and no outlets bothered to walk the story back even after videos of civilian celebrations emerged across Aleppo and the Russo-Turkish plan was announced for civilians and militants to receive safe exit passage.

Undoubtedly, Syria's conflict includes a "fog of war." Those who are trying to definitively suss out all the competing claims from the battlefield, from computers thousands of miles away and without their own sources on the ground, are deluding themselves. Seemingly all the news sources in Aleppo have links to the militant groups there or to the governments engaged in both sides of battle.

But despite the difficulties of verifying battlefield claims, that does not mean it is difficult to understand that last week's media blitz was selective, and therefore political.

For instance, practically no Western media coverage was given to the militant groups' shelling of western Aleppo's civilian areas, or the abuses visited upon the communities of Aleppo since the militant groups arrived and set up there, or the massacres associated with their military victories elsewhere in the country.

Moreover, in Iraq, Syria's next-door neighbor, the U.S. bombing of Mosul and surrounding areas just a few days prior killed a comparable number of civilians that were claimed to have been killed in the retaking of East Aleppo. Most of the people hearing and posting about Aleppo last week — for the first time — have been fed a neatly-packaged sliver of information, and their outrage and sympathy has been stirred selectively.

What then was behind the sudden media craze around Aleppo? It is politics. The militant groups in Aleppo, presumably in league with their handlers in the CIA, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and alongside their "human rights" and media front groups, clearly see that a possible Syria policy shift may be coming from the Trump administration, and oppose any negotiations with the Assad government at this moment that they have so little leverage.

Their main objective is to prevent the normalization and stabilization of the Syrian state, and the main way to do that — facing an inevitable and long-coming military defeat in Aleppo — was to turn the moment of that defeat into a propaganda victory. The assassination of the Russian Ambassador in Turkey fits the same pattern of trying to slow down and thwart these negotiations.

The U.S. policy in Syria is, after all, far from settled. There are some elements of the U.S. ruling class that believe the complete overthrow of the Syrian government is now impossible because of Russia's intervention — and that the destruction of Syria's state institutions, like in Iraq and Libya before it, would simply enable ISIS to grow further. Some militarists and strategists close to the incoming Trump administration are now projecting a middle course — the partitioning of Syria with separate governments in separate zones.

In this context, with so much on the line, the advocates for expanded war and unrelenting antagonism towards the Syrian government made use of the common techniques to build support for previous "humanitarian interventions" — no matter how illegal, destructive and destabilizing they may be. This technique is to throw out all background or context for a given country's conflicts, portray the leader of the targeted state as the most bloodthirsty demon, sadistically reveling in bloodshed, and then highlight a few "civilian" or "democratic" voices pleading for Western help as a stand-in for the desires of "the people." Even from thousands of miles away, unable to verify the competing battlefield claims, that script is clear as day.

There is no question that war is ugly and this one, grinding on for years, fueled by limitless weapons and convulsing all of society, is no different. There have been crimes and abuses

on all sides, and hundreds of thousands of civilian non-combatants have tragically perished. But Samantha Power and the U.S. government's crocodile tears have nothing to do with human rights violations. In the modern era of imperialism, such selective human rights campaigns have become the primary vehicles for the projection of U.S. power, from direct interventions to the arming and funding of proxy groups, to the imposition of sanctions.

To put it simply: if the U.S. ruling class was forced to speak openly about its true motives — the preservation of a world order based on U.S. military and financial domination — few people in the United States, let alone the rest of the world, would accept it. In the historical era of direct colonial plunder and occupation, few humanitarian pretenses were needed, but because the U.S. Empire operates in the name of “freedom” and “democracy” its maneuvers have to always be inscribed with some lofty purpose.

Syria has long been in the crosshairs

While Syria may be a fresh news item for the public, Damascus has long been in U.S. crosshairs. U.S. intelligence closely monitored a decades-long war between the secular Baath Party in Syria and the Sunni religious Muslim Brotherhood, identifying it as a continuing vulnerability for the state. (See Patrick Seale's “Asad and the Struggle for the Middle East” for a rigorous appraisal of this topic).

Retired Gen. Wesley Clark recounted that ten days after Sept. 11, he spoke with a senior Dept. of Defense official who told him, “we are going to take out seven countries in five years – starting with Iraq, and then Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and finishing off, Iran.” George W. Bush included Syria in his 2002 “axis of evil” speech, listing off the governments that would be targeted for regime change.

Intercepted State Department cables recently published in “The Wikileaks Files” showed that destabilizing the Syrian government was a U.S. priority years before the Arab Spring. William Roebuck, the chargé d'affaires at the U.S. embassy in Damascus, highlighted the “potential threat to the regime from the increasing presence of transiting Islamist extremists.”

In “The Wikileaks Files,” journalist Robert Naiman also discusses a leaked 2006 cable from the U.S. embassy in Damascus back to the Secretary of State. At this time the direct U.S. military intervention was impossible because of the stubborn Iraqi resistance, but:

“the U.S. goal in December 2006 was to undermine the Syrian government by any available means, and that what mattered was whether U.S. action would help destabilize the government, not what other impacts the action might have. In public the U.S. was in favor of economic reform, but in private the U.S. saw conflict between economic reform and “entrenched, corrupt forces” as an “opportunity.” In public, the U.S. was opposed to “Islamist extremists” everywhere; but in private it saw the “potential threat to the regime from the increasing presence of transiting Islamist extremists” as an “opportunity” that the U.S. should take action to try to increase.

Sure enough, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, and the U.S. helped coordinate extensive funding and support for the jihadists' anti-Assad campaign, and literally transported them from Libya after the war there was won.

Meanwhile, London- and Washington-based marketing firms spoonfed the public high-tech

infomercials and phony Twitter updates in order to present Western governments as the representatives of justice and peace.

The full gamut of “respectable” media outlets (even those who claim to be to the left (like Democracy Now and the Huffington Post) counterposed the benevolent West with the evil, blood-curdling Assad and his Russian and Iranian backers narrowing in on hapless supporters of democracy.

Syria observers should pay close attention to how the Pentagon orchestrated the re-packaging of the anti-government forces in Aleppo. In September 2015, as Russia’s involvement decisively shifted the balance of forces in the war, the media made a special effort to paint the right-wing Islamist extremists that controlled Aleppo as “moderate rebels.”

They changed the narrative in Aleppo — not because al-Qaeda and like-minded groups had been defeated or had abandoned their fight there — but because they had no real desire to collaborate with Russia or the Syrian state in defeating them. Their goal remained to weaken and bog down the Syrian government, believing that a loss in Aleppo would bring the state to its knees.

Why the U.S. wants regime change in Syria

This question has been the subject of continued confusion on the left because the Syrian government made neoliberal-oriented reforms and collaborated with the U.S. government in certain regional conflicts.

Syria has a bourgeois-nationalist government — deriving from a form of bourgeois-national revolution, which involved independence, land reform and integration, secularism, women’s rights, nationalization of natural resources and the consolidation of a new Syrian ruling class around the military and state-owned companies. In its relations with imperialism, Syria’s bourgeois-nationalist government generally became more conciliatory over time, and collaborated with the West in the Lebanese Civil War, the first Iraq war, and intelligence-sharing after 9/11.

But history has shown that concessions from independent, nationalist or even socialist governments do not eliminate the U.S. long-term strategic objectives to overthrow them. The same pattern took place in Yugoslavia (1999), Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011). These countries each developed working relationships with the U.S. Empire but, when the moment of opportunity emerged — an internal crisis within the targeted country or a major outside event — the U.S. foreign policy establishment and militarists did not hesitate to swing into action, demonize their leaders and bomb their countries to smithereens.

To manage its Empire effectively, the U.S. ruling class must all the time find accommodation with a range of governments with differing political systems. Washington sees the countries whose state institutions derive from the anti-colonial upsurges of the 1950s to 1970s — the age of national liberation and socialist breakthroughs — as vestiges of the Cold War era, as pieces on their global chessboard that sometimes move against them, and ultimately must be removed.

Washington’s main problem is not these governments’ official ideologies. It is the fact that

such governments, such as Syria's, dare to follow their own national interests in defiance of the Western-approved "international community"; they freely strike up economic deals and political alliances with other governments that the West would like to turn into pariahs; they control militaries that do not rely on the United States for weaponry; they assist resistance forces and non-state actors that the United States would like to eliminate; they give refuge to groups and individuals the Empire wants on its hit list; and they have the gall to denounce and even subvert imperialist maneuvers. Syria also did not fully turn over its internal markets and productive apparatus to Western corporate penetration.

The neoconservative elements of the U.S. ruling class — in charge during the Bush years — actively planned to wipe all such troublesome governments off the map. But even those in the Obama administration who are more reluctant about the neoconservative project still operate according to American "exceptionalism," which requires the constant reinforcement and demonstration of U.S. power as the foundation for the stability of their imperial world order.

More important than what a given country has done or not done, the rules of this world order must be maintained. The foundational rule is that the U.S. Empire must follow through on all its threats and if it does not fill any potential "vacuum" of power anywhere in the world, other states will fill the void and this will be seen as weakness and vulnerability. The foundation of the U.S.-dominated world order will begin to shake as even their existing client states and junior partners will begin to pursue independent courses of action.

Libya's downfall is instructive for anti-imperialists. It is unlikely that Libya was a target of the Obama administration when he came into office, and there clearly was no grand master plan for what to do with Libya once its government was overthrown. But when the opportunity arose for intervention — and the U.S. ruling class increasingly united around the need to exert more "leadership" over the situation — the war was on. The chorus of vilification of Gaddafi, tied to the drumbeats of war, became deafening. Very few progressives stood with groups like the ANSWER Coalition as we agitated and protested another U.S./NATO war of conquest.

Libya has since descended into sectarianism and re-division and been subjected to Western plunder. History has proven correct the anti-war movement of that time, as well as the large numbers of Libyans who rallied to their government's defense — but at the time such voices were given no media coverage and cast aside as "Gaddafi apologists."

After Libya's government was overthrown, the country soon faded from Western headlines. No one on the Left, it seems, has critically reviewed their silence at the time. In fact, even though Syria became a replay of Libya, but on a larger scale, many in the anti-war movement fell into the same pattern.

Oppressed countries' right to self-defense

What was presented in the mainstream media as a civil war in Syria has from 2011 been a dirty war on Syria. For over five years, up to 120,000 Syrian Arab Army soldiers and allied militiamen have died in this war against the arch-reactionary, fundamentalist and assorted proxy armies. Each of these groups relies on financial and logistical support from the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the other reactionary Gulf monarchies. They transported recruits into Syria from scores of different countries.

By 2013 and 2014, it seemed impossible that the Syrian government could withstand these combined forces. Syria's government sought the more active support of their allies — Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia, as well as the Palestinian organization PFLP-GC.

Then the stunning military successes of ISIS woke the world up to the monster that the Western war drive had created. When Syria's partners more forcefully entered the conflict to take on these organizations, the Western governments could complain, but hardly protest too much without appearing to be on the side of Al-Qaeda. The CIA and Department of Defense claimed to be building a proxy army of "moderate rebels," but this project was a failure; they could not find enough "moderate" recruits, and those they did train quickly defected with their advanced weaponry to form alliances, or join, with the more adept fighters of al-Qaeda.

Russia's direct intervention on the invitation of the Syrian government in 2015 — after four years of providing the government with weaponry — is not comparable to the U.S. role in the country, nor to its long history of illegal and unilateral meddling, invasions, bombing campaigns and sanctions carried out against independent nations.

The Party for Socialism and Liberation opposes the demand for Russian withdrawal from Syria. It is not because we consider the Russian state a consistent force for progressive and anti-imperialist politics. How one understands Russia's class character and motivations for intervening are ultimately secondary to the stakes of the struggle inside Syria itself.

The Syrian government is legitimate and internationally recognized, and yet has been subject to an undeclared war from the world's most powerful states. The external fomenting and arming of rebel groups inside a sovereign nation is the equivalent of waging aggressive war on that country.

While the formalities of international law cannot be the guiding light in all political questions, according to the charter of the United Nations, any country under attack has the right of self-defense and has the right to ask for the assistance of other governments. This clearly applies to Syria's invitation to Russia's air force in 2015. It is the height of imperial arrogance for U.S. rulers to decide which governments are legitimate, which ones must live and die, and when international law can be unilaterally revoked.

The withdrawal of Russia — in the context of multiple outside powers overtly and covertly stimulating proxy forces within Syria — would have led to the militant jihadist groups' victory and would likely lead to this today as well. Their victory would not mean freedom, democracy or self-determination but the subjection of the country to warlordism, medieval caliphates, partition, further bloodletting and complete subordination to Western powers and Gulf monarchies.

The fall of Assad to such forces would be, in the words of Saleh Muslim, who leads the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), "a calamity." The PYD does not call for Russian withdrawal either.

The truth is that those in the West leading the charge for Russian withdrawal — which extends from war-hawks like John McCain to human rights NGOs to some leftist groups — all support the "rebels." It has nothing to do with anti-imperialism because in the same breath they condemn the Western governments for not having done "more."

The ideal scenario that “everyone should leave Syria” is meaningless as a political slogan in the context of an active battlefield that has engaged so many states overtly and covertly. It is an outlook that equates the aggressor nations with the targeted nation. Even if Russia were to withdraw unilaterally now, the Western governments would continue to surreptitiously foment war in Syria so long as they consider this beneficial.

The key link for ending the war, allowing all foreign powers to leave Syria — including Russia — is for the West, Turkey and Gulf monarchies to end their policy of arming, funding, and providing safe passage to the militant fundamentalist groups. Without this support, the war would have ended a long time ago.

The struggle for Syria enters a new phase

A year ago, the road to Damascus appeared wide open to the fundamentalist death squads and the West. The resilience of the Syrian Army — which itself reflects the base of support that the government still retains — combined with the assistance of Russia, Hezbollah, and Iran threw a wrench into their game.

While the Syrian army’s entrance into Aleppo represented its liberation from the clutches of fundamentalist terror groups, the same forces are now regrouping in Idlib, 59 kilometers south west of Aleppo, and Raqqa, 160 kilometers east of Aleppo.

The gruesome war for Syria is not over.

Progressive Americans who want to truly stand with the people of Syria should remember Malcolm X prescient words which ring truer than ever today: “If you’re not careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed, and loving the people who are doing the oppressing.”

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