

Hillary Clinton and Middle East War Crimes

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Image: Hillary Clinton with Libyan rebels

Testifying before a Senate committee Tuesday, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that Syria's President Bashar al-Assad could be branded a "war criminal."

"Based on definitions of war criminal and crimes against humanity, there would be an argument to be made that he [Assad] would fit into that category," Clinton told the Senate panel.

The ratcheting up of Washington's rhetoric is aimed at winning public support for yet another imperialist intervention in the Middle East, with regime-change once again dressed up as a crusade for human rights. Clinton's statement, however, begs a question. How precisely does she determine when armed violence against civilians constitutes a war crime?

There is the definition embodied in the legislation founding the International Criminal Court, largely adopted from the charter that established the Nuremberg tribunal, which brought surviving leaders of Germany's Nazi regime to trial after World War II. This defines such crimes as a number of acts—including murder, extermination, torture, imprisonment and enforced disappearance of persons—knowingly "committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population..."

While Clinton would be happy to accept this definition for use against the Syrian regime, there appears to be an unwritten restriction on which individuals or governments can be said to "fit into that category." As far as the American political and media establishment is concerned, it is fine to employ the war criminal label when describing violence employed by a regime that the United States is seeking to overthrow against "rebels" or "oppositionists" that enjoy Washington's support.

However, when even greater violence is unleashed by the United States itself against people opposing the occupation of their country by American troops, the same category is excluded.

The push for defining Assad as a war criminal intensified in the face of the 27-day siege of the Baba Amr neighborhood of Homs, which was seized by armed militias whose activities have included the abduction and murder of non-Sunni residents of the city. On Thursday, these US-backed "rebels" announced that they were pulling out of the area in the face of superior Syrian government forces.

There is no doubt that hundreds died in the month-long siege, including unarmed civilians. Yet, when considering the barrage of media denunciations, United Nations resolutions and statements of outrage from Washington and other Western capitals, it is worth remembering the silent indifference with which these same media sources and governments reacted to a massacre of at least 20 times as many civilians in a third of the time barely 400 miles from the siege of Homs.

That was in November of 2004. The site of the massacre was Fallujah, Iraq. In that barbaric siege, US Marines turned an entire city into a free-fire zone after warning its inhabitants to leave. Men and boys, however, were turned back, forced to face an onslaught of napalm, cluster bombs, white phosphorus shells and other munitions that incinerated their victims and brought their homes crashing down upon them. Of the 50,000 Fallujans who were either unwilling or unable to flee, more than 6,000 lost their lives. Fully 60 percent of the city's buildings were demolished or damaged.

Seven years later, the residents of Fallujah still pay a terrible price for the collective punishment inflicted upon them. They endure an epidemic of birth defects, childhood cancers and other ailments caused by depleted uranium shells and other ordnance dumped on the city.

Why is it that the actions of the Assad regime in Homs are declared to “fit the category” of war crimes, while the far bloodier actions carried out by the US military in Fallujah and countless other atrocities committed under both the Bush and Obama administrations in unprovoked wars against the peoples of Iraq and Afghanistan are deemed justifiable measures in a “war on terror,” for which no one has ever been held accountable?

Before bombing Fallujah into rubble, the US military claimed that the slaughter was necessary because the Iraqi city had become the headquarters for Al Qaeda in Iraq. Indeed, both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars were justified to the American people as wars to vanquish Al Qaeda and prevent it from obtaining “weapons of mass destruction.”

In the past week, Hillary Clinton has used an identical phrase repeatedly in congressional testimony and media interviews in response to questions about proposals to arm the Syrian “rebels.” She has raised the question: “Are we supporting Al Qaeda in Syria?”

While broaching the issue in rhetorical form to suggest that Washington has reservations about providing those seeking Assad's overthrow with weapons, Clinton knows full well that in the real world the arms are being sent and the answer to her question is, “Yes we are.” Just as in the war on Libya, US imperialism is working closely in Syria with the same Islamist elements that it long portrayed as the greatest threat to the American people.

While serving as a convenient bogeyman to terrorize the American people into accepting wars of imperialist aggression, the reality is that the relationship between Washington and Al Qaeda—founded by forces funded and armed by the CIA in the US-backed war against the pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan in the 1980s—has always been a complex one.

From the 1950s on, US imperialism gave its covert support to reactionary, obscurantist Islamist organizations in the Middle East as a counterweight to socialism and radical nationalism. Now it is employing these forces once again in an attempt to redraw the geo-strategic map of the region and place its vast energy resources under Washington's thumb.

Behind the crocodile tears shed by the war criminals in Washington, the demands for regime-change in Syria have no more to do with human rights than the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq had to do with protecting the American people from terrorism.

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