

U.S. Wars Continue in New Year

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Militarily, the U.S. is entering 2015 with its hands full.

The U.S. war in Afghanistan was supposed to have ended after 13 years on Dec. 31, 2014, but it's still going on and thousands of American troops are continuing the fight.

The U.S. war against Iraq ended officially Dec. 31, 2011, but it has now metamorphosed into Washington's air war against the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria. There are increasing hints U.S. ground troops may be sent in this year. (3,000 American military advisers are already there and 1,500 allied troops are expected soon.)

The U.S., British, French war against Libya ended with regime change in 2011, but this oil-rich country is now engaged in civil wars, and is evidently falling apart. In addition, the Islamic State has established a foothold in Libya. It is likely the U.S. covertly or openly will intervene to safeguard its interests.

Washington has supported the regime-change war against Syria for three years, politically and financially. Allied Saudi Arabia and other powerful Sunni countries have paid for the jihadist fighters who lead the struggle. Now, the U.S. needs the Syrian government and opposition to help fight against IS, but the jihadists and their secular allies have joined forces to continue pummeling the Damascus regime. The U.S. has not physically entered the war yet, but key Democrats as well as Republicans have shown interest in doing so.

This accounting does not include President Barack Obama's drone wars in Yemen, western Pakistan, Somalia or other countries, nor the provocative NATO expansion against Russia and the U.S. military buildup in East Asia against China.

All the wars against Muslim countries listed above have been launched since Sept. 11, 2001 — and each, so far, has turned out to be either a humiliating failure, a stalemate or has resulted in an undesired conclusion. The war against the IS may not be decided for years and it seems doubtful it will end in a U.S. victory. Following is a look at these events as the new year begins:

1. The Afghanistan War Continues

The 13-year-old Afghanistan war has "ended" as a stalemate for the U.S., if not a defeat. Originally, the Pentagon was supposed to pull out of this terribly poor country entirely by the end of 2014. Several months ago an agreement was reached with newly elected President Ashraf Ghani to permit some 12,000 American troops to remain until the end of 2015 in "non-combat roles."

In November, responding to increased fighting by the Taliban, President Obama announced

American soldiers would now serve mainly as a combat force augmented by U.S. air power, drones, the CIA and an unspecified number of contractors. It's ludicrous to claim the war is over.

The conflict is becoming more intense. In 2014, according to the UN, 3,200 Afghan civilians were killed, as were more than 5,000 members of the Afghan security forces, the highest toll since 2001. The fighting is expected to increase considerably this year.

The U.S. had pressured former President Hamid Karzai to allow the troops to remain for 10 more years, but he wouldn't even agree to one year. It is possible Washington will now work on Ghazi for permission to remain until 2024.

It was unnecessary, in the first place, to invade Afghanistan after al-Qaeda's attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. After all these years there is nothing to show for the war but deaths and destruction, aside from the mystical reincarnation of slain al-Qaeda leader Osama bin-Laden into the Islamic State's caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of Obama war number five.

Just before the October 2001 invasion, during a period of intense national hyper-patriotism, a section of the U.S. left (including this newsletter) strongly opposed launching a war, calling instead for international police action to bring al-Qaeda and its followers to justice. The ANSWER coalition organized a "No War" rally in Washington that attracted 25,000 people just days before President George W. Bush ordered the Oct. 7 bombardment of Afghanistan that began the war. The great majority of Americans first backed the war but that changed in a few years. The national activist left continued its opposition to the Afghan adventure, but in less than two years it was also leading the growing mass opposition to the Bush Administration's plans to attack Iraq.

Had Bush relied on police action instead of war he would have saved the lives of 2,313 U.S. soldiers, 3,248 U.S. contractors, 1,114 allied troops, over 13,000 Afghan military and police plus tens of thousands of civilian lives, and probably over a trillion U.S. dollars — so far. Afghanistan was a troubled country when the U.S. invaded. Now it is a wreck except in a niche agricultural category: it produces 90% of the world's opium, right under Uncle Sam's obviously knowing nose despite the fact that opium-derived heroin makes its way as an addictive drug into the thriving U.S. illegal market.

2. The Fiascos In Iraq

The U.S.-initiated Iraq War, which lasted from March 2003 until the end of 2011, resulted in a humiliating stalemate for the White House, covered up with Obama's praise for the role of the U.S. military the day they pulled out. A huge antiwar movement developed in the U.S. and the world months before the invasion but did not prevent the warmongering Bush Administration from launching an illegal and unjust military escapade — with Democratic Party approval, of course.

The neoconservative coterie running the Bush White House actually believed it would not only be victorious in a matter of months but would also pave the way for successful invasions of Syria, Iran and possibly some other Middle Eastern countries. Their pre-war estimates of the cost of invading, defeating, and occupying Iraq were \$50-\$60 billion. In reality, it cost at least \$4 trillion with some estimates 50% higher when all costs are counted, including decades of interest payments.

Compounding this fiasco is the current U.S. war against the Islamic State, a direct derivative of the Iraq war. It is too early to label this conflict a fiasco, but it could well qualify after Obama or his successor sends in the ground troops, which seems inevitable in time. This is actually America's third war of choice in Iraq in 24 years — 1990 (the Gulf War), followed by over 12 years of killer sanctions, followed by the 2003-11 conflict.

In 2003, Iraq posed no threat to the U.S., had no role in 9/11 and did not harbor even one member of al-Qaeda

in the country. But President Bush and his neocon handlers lied repeatedly to the American people about the "imminent danger" they faced from this small and distant country. The invasion and occupation cost the lives of 4,489 U.S. soldiers, 3,455 U.S. contractors, 318 allied troops, 12,096 Iraqi military and police. Up to one million Iraqis lost their lives and four million became internal and external refugees. The country is a shambles. Washington's divide and conquer occupation strategy was a major factor in the subsequent escalation of the Sunni-Shi'ite religious sectarianism that abounds today.

Early last year, as a direct result of the U.S. stalemate in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (now the Islamic State) captured territory in both Syria and Iraq. This organization broke into the headlines last June when it captured the major Iraqi city of Mosul with a population of a million people. IS confiscated a huge supply of American military equipment and looted the city's banks, becoming rich overnight. Suddenly the U.S. realized that the Iraq war hadn't ended at all, especially when IS has continued to seize more land and towns.

Within a couple of months Washington organized a 60-state anti-IS alliance but in the absence of ground troops it may be a mile wide but it's just an inch deep. None, led by the U.S., wanted to send troops. Obama is desperate for help on the ground from both the Syrian and Iranian governments — which he kept out of the alliance — but will not dare say so publicly.

So far the bulk of the Iraqi army has not played a major role. The U.S. foolishly dissolved the army it defeated in 2003 and decided in effect to build its own new Iraqi army at a cost to American taxpayers of \$25 billion over the years in training and equipping. It turned out after the loss of Mosul that the new Iraqi officer corps and military bureaucracy was so extraordinarily corrupt that the army had to be retrained, a process still taking place, although a number of units are now in the field.

Iraqi Shi'ite militias and Iranian officers and troops have helped hold the fort on the ground. The Iranians are fighting IS in Iraq, but on their own. Both Tehran and Washington have stated they are not working together — a politically necessary decision on both accounts. The New York Times reported Nov. 22 "even American officials acknowledge the decisive role of Iranian-backed militias, particularly in protecting Baghdad from an assault by the Islamic State.... Iran's increasingly public military role has proved essential in repelling the advances of the Islamic State."

According to news reports Dec. 9: "Secretary of State John Kerry today called for Congress to keep the door open for ground deployments of troops to fight the Islamic State in not only Iraq and Syria, but also elsewhere in the Middle East." This report is ambiguous but Pentagon generals have been suggesting the need for U.S. "boots on the ground" in Iraq and Syria. A number of Republicans in Congress, led by Sen John McCain, support sending

U.S. ground troops to fight IS.

3. Libya Is Falling Apart

Over three years ago (as their sham part of the Arab Spring) the U.S. and its NATO partners, backed by reactionary Arab monarchies, decided to bring about violent regime change in oil-rich Libya to establish a government that would far better serve the interests of Western imperialism. Their alleged justification was to rid the country of Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi, whom they termed a vicious dictator.

In reality, as Patrick Cockburn wrote in the Independent (UK) in March: “The NATO powers that overthrew Gaddafi did not do so because he was a tyrannical ruler, but because he pursued a nationalist policy which was at odds with Western policies in the Middle East.”

The U.S., UK and France — each of which repeatedly bombed and strafed the Libyan government and military on behalf of rebel forces supposedly seeking democracy — bragged about bringing “freedom” to the Libyan people when the regime fell and Gaddafi was tortured to death by a mob. What they actually delivered to Libya was the chaos of ethnic warlords, jihadists and racketeers. Libya has been without a functioning government, police force, or army since the Gaddafi regime fell.

The catastrophe resulting from Washington’s war for regime change was made clear in this Dec. 3 report from the BBC:

“Islamic State militants have set up training camps in eastern Libya, the head of the U.S. Africa command says. Gen David Rodriguez said there could be ‘a couple of hundred’ IS fighters undergoing training at the sites. He said the camps were at a very early stage, but the U.S. was watching them “carefully to see how it develops.

“Libya has been in turmoil since Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown in 2011, with various tribes, militia and political factions fighting for power. Several Islamist groups are competing for power in the east of the country, with some militants recently declaring allegiance to IS.... In the aftermath of the revolution that ousted Gaddafi, many rebel fighters left to fight with militant groups in Syria, and some are believed to have returned home.

“The elected government has lost Libya’s three main cities amid the political crisis. Benghazi, the country’s second city, is in the hands of Islamist fighters, and the internationally recognized parliament is now based in the coastal town of Tobruk in the east.”

Writing Nov. 2 in the Independent, under the headline “The West is silent as Libya falls into the abyss,” Cockburn noted:

“Without the rest of the world paying much attention, a civil war has been raging in western Libya since July 13 between the Libya Dawn coalition of militias, originally based in Misrata, and another militia group centered on Zintan. A largely separate civil war between the forces of retired Gen. Khalifa Haftar and the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries is being fought out in the city. Government has collapsed. Amnesty says that torture has become commonplace with victims being ‘beaten with plastic tubes, sticks, metal bars or cables, given electric shocks, suspended in stress positions for hours, kept

blindfolded and shackled for days.’”

Reuters reported Dec. 10:

“Almost 50 people have been killed in the past 10 days in fighting between Libyan pro-government forces and Islamist groups in the second-largest city, Benghazi. That brings the death toll to around 450 since army special forces and troops led by Haftar launched an offensive against Islamists in Benghazi.”

There was a seeming incongruity to the strenuous U.S./NATO effort to bring about regime change in Libya. To quote from Wikipedia:

“From 1999 Gaddafi encouraged economic privatization and sought rapprochement with Western nations, also embracing Pan-Africanism and helping to establish the African Union. In December 2003, Libya renounced its possession of weapons of mass destruction, decommissioning its chemical and nuclear weapons programs. Relations with the U.S. improved as a result while UK Prime Minister Tony Blair met with Gaddafi in the Libyan Desert in March 2004. The following month, Gaddafi travelled to the headquarters of the European Union (EU) in Brussels, signifying improved relations between Libya and the EU, the latter ending its remaining sanctions in October.”

Nothing seems to have changed between the Washington and Tripoli from that time to 2011 when the U.S. and its partners began bombing Libya to assist the faltering rebel factions who were running out of steam. President Obama, convinced that the new regime would quickly subordinate itself to Washington, suggested that democracy would flourish in the country as soon as the rebels took over. It was one more gross miscalculation.

The U.S. obviously must regret the outcome of its regime-change fiasco and will have little choice but to intervene in one way or another if matters are not resolved to its satisfaction.

4. Syrian Regime Still Struggles To Survive:

President Obama has been calling for the overthrow of the Syrian government led by President Bashar al-Assad for over three years — another duplicitous attempt to demonstrate Washington’s backing for the Arab Spring when it was fashionable to do so in 2011. In this case, as in others, Obama sought regime change in the guise of democracy to bring about a government considerably more willing to satisfy U.S. regional interests than Assad, a strong ally of America’s two perceived opponents — Iran and Russia.

America’s interest in Syria is geopolitical — maintaining control of the Middle East. Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Turkey and other regional Sunni states seek to weaken Shi’ite influence and neutralize Iran by getting rid of Assad’s Alawite regime (a branch of Shia theology). Most of the rebels seek to replace him with a Sunni-led government as religiously fundamentalist as they could get away with in a non-sectarian society where at minimum 35% were non-Sunni Muslims and Christians.

In the last two years and some months, various jihadist forces took over the bulk of fighting, but the White House still demanded the ouster of Assad. By doing so Obama conveyed the impression Washington supported the jihadist-led rebel campaign. Evident U.S. backing for the civil war further encouraged Saudi Arabia and Turkey, among others, to increase their

political and material support for rebel jihadist fundamentalists.

Though somewhat muted today since going to war with IS last summer, the White House officially remains desirous of ousting Assad, despite the fact that the formidable Islamic State is the leading force in the anti-Assad rebellion as well as fighting to win power in neighboring Iraq. Now that it is preoccupied in a war with the Islamic State, Washington may have postponed the matter of Assad's overthrow until subduing the religio-fascist IS, a far more formidable antagonist.

The civil war against the Assad government has taken a terrible toll in lives and infrastructure. It is estimated that between 160,000 and 191,000 people have been killed so far. A great many have been civilians. The U.S. government and news media consistently imply (but never actually state) that nearly all the deaths are of civilians killed by the Assad regime, which is untrue. Scores of thousands of Syrian government soldiers have been killed, along with a large number of rebels, substantially adding to the total. In addition, IS and its chief rival, al-Qaeda's al-Nusra Front, have killed thousands of rebel fighters as well as government troops and civilians.

Obama should have ended his ill-advised anti-Assad regime change campaign in Syria as soon as it became obvious two years ago that dozens of big and small jihadi groups had taken over most of the fighting against the regime in Damascus. During these two years IS has become strong enough to control about one third of the territory of both Syria and neighboring Iraq.

In addition to continuing Islamic State attacks on Syrian government installations and territory, various other jihadist groups are continuing the fight to overthrow the Assad regime, even though the U.S. has appealed for them to temporarily postpone the war on Damascus and join the anti-IS fight. Last week Stratfor reported al-Qaeda's "Jabhat al-Nusra and its allies in Ahrar al-Sham pose one of the biggest threats to loyalist forces.... Al-Qaeda-affiliated fighters have made their way to long-contested Daraa province, where they have maintained relatively friendly ties with operatives of the (U.S.-backed) Free Syrian Army. Together these forces have scored significant battlefield victories, claiming more than 80% of Quneitra province from loyalists."

What Now?

The years have shown that Obama is a war president and (once again) the Democrats are a war party, not exactly as wretched as the Republican war party but bad enough. Both support a militarist and imperialist foreign policy intended to insure continued American world domination.

There is not even a small hint that the U.S. government intends to modify its war-making ways in 2015 or thereafter. Now that the right wing is about to control both houses of Congress this situation may well worsen. And the 2016 presidential election probably will be worse still with two warhawks competing for the White House.

In the absence of a large, viable progressive third party to fight against the war parties, it is up to the left and progressive movements and NGOs to step up their peace and justice activities.

Where is the U.S. antiwar movement in all of this? It certainly exists in the ANSWER coalition

that protested against the new Iraq war and a few months ago organized a score of demonstrations across the U.S. in opposition to war in Gaza that brought out tens of thousands of people. There are a few other other national groups, largely of the left, such as World Can't Wait, and a couple of groups that essentially live online and call occasional conferences. These organizations have opposed all the U.S. wars mentioned in this article — but there's a problem:

The peace movement was massive during the eight-year Republican Bush Administration, and most of the rank and file were Democrats, even if the national leaderships were frequently aligned with the political left. Tragically, the antiwar movements began to decline markedly when Obama won the November 2008 presidential election and the peace forces virtually collapsed during the first months after he took office.

The Democratic base of the movement stopped attending peace rallies, even though many Democrats retained antiwar sentiments and public opinion turned against the wars. They didn't want to take public action against a Democratic president, even as he not only continued but expanded Bush's wars. It is to be hoped that peace Democrats have learned a lesson after these years of war under Obama.

It is certainly time for a revival of the mass antiwar movements. The two establishment parties are pro-war. Unless these movements get big enough to produce a multitude of truly mass protests and other actions including civil disobedience, the Washington warmakers will simply continue going from war to war.

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