

Election Campaign: Debate Moderator Distorted Syrian Reality

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The American people are receiving a highly distorted view of the Syrian war – much propaganda, little truth – including from one of the moderators at the second presidential debate, writes Robert Parry.

How ABC News' **Martha Raddatz** framed her question about Syria in the second presidential debate shows why the mainstream U.S. news media, with its deep-seated biases and inability to deal with complexity, has become such a driving force for wider wars and even a threat to the future of the planet.

Raddatz, the network's chief global affairs correspondent, presented the Syrian conflict as simply a case of barbaric aggression by the Syrian government and its Russian allies against the Syrian people, especially the innocents living in Aleppo.



ABC News' chief global affairs correspondent Martha Raddatz.

"Just days ago, the State Department called for a war crimes investigation of the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad and its ally, Russia, for their bombardment of Aleppo," Raddatz said. "So this next question comes through social media through Facebook. Diane from Pennsylvania asks, if you were president, what would you do about Syria and the humanitarian crisis in Aleppo? Isn't it a lot like the Holocaust when the U.S. waited too long before we helped?"

The framing of the question assured a response from former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton about [her determination to expand the U.S. military intervention in Syria](#) to include a "no-fly zone," which U.S. military commanders say would require a massive operation that would kill many Syrians, both soldiers and civilians, to eliminate Syria's sophisticated air-defense systems and its air force.

But Raddatz's loaded question was also a way of influencing – or misleading – U.S. public opinion. Consider for a moment how a more honest and balanced question could have elicited a very different response and a more thoughtful discussion:

"The situation in Aleppo presents a heartrending and nettlesome concern. Al Qaeda fighters and their rebel allies, including some who have been armed by the United States, are holed up in some neighborhoods of eastern Aleppo. They've been firing rockets into the center and western sections of Aleppo and they have shot civilians seeking to leave east Aleppo

through humanitarian corridors.

“These terrorists and their ‘moderate’ rebel allies seem to be using the tens of thousands of civilians still in east Aleppo as ‘human shields’ in order to create sympathy from Western audiences when the Syrian government seeks to root the terrorists and other insurgents from these neighborhoods with airstrikes that have killed both armed fighters and civilians. In such a circumstance, what should the U.S. role be and was it a terrible mistake to [supply these fighters with sophisticated rockets and other weapons](#), given that these weapons have helped Al Qaeda in seizing and holding territory?”

Siding with Al Qaeda

Raddatz also could have noted that a key reason why the recent limited cease-fire failed was that the U.S.-backed “moderate” rebels in east Aleppo had rebuffed Secretary of State John Kerry’s demand that they separate themselves from Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front, which now calls itself the Syria Conquest Front.



Secretary of State John Kerry (right) and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. (U.N. photo)

Instead of breaking ties with Al Qaeda, some of [these “moderate” rebel groups reaffirmed or expanded their alliances with Al Qaeda](#). In other words, Official Washington’s distinction between Al Qaeda’s terrorists and the “moderate” rebels was publicly revealed to be largely a myth. But the reality of U.S.-aided rebels collaborating with the terror group that carried out the 9/11 attacks complicates the preferred mainstream narrative of Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin “the bad guys” versus the rebels “the good guys.”

If Raddatz had posed her question with the more complex reality (rather than the simplistic, biased form that she chose) and if Clinton still responded with her recipe of a “no-fly zone,” the obvious follow-up would be: “Wouldn’t such a military intervention constitute aggressive war against Syria in violation of the United Nations Charter and the Nuremberg principles?”

“And wouldn’t such a strategy risk tipping the military balance inside Syria in favor of Al Qaeda and its jihadist allies, possibly even its spinoff terror group, the Islamic State? And what would the United States do then, if its destruction of the Syrian air force led to the black flag of jihadist terror flying over Damascus as well as all of Aleppo? Would a Clinton-45 administration send in U.S. troops to stop the likely massacre of Christians, Alawites, Shiites, secular Sunnis and other ‘heretics’?”

There would be other obvious and important questions that a more objective Martha

Raddatz would ask: “Would your no-fly zone include shooting down Russian aircraft that are flying inside Syria at the invitation of the Syrian government? Might such a clash provoke a superpower escalation, possibly even invite nuclear war?”

But no such discussion is allowed inside the mainstream U.S. media’s frame. There is an unstated assumption that the United States has the unquestioned right to invade other countries at will, regardless of international law, and there is a studied silence about this hypocrisy even as the U.S. State Department touts the sanctity of international law.

Whose War Crimes?

Raddatz’s favorable reference to the State Department accusing the Syrian and Russian governments of war crimes further suggests a stunning lack of self-awareness, a blindness to America’s own guilt in that regard. How can any American journalist put on such blinders regarding even recent U.S. war crimes, including the illegal invasion of Iraq that led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis?



President George W. Bush in a flight suit after landing on the USS Abraham Lincoln to give his “Mission Accomplished” speech about the Iraq War on May 1, 2003.

While Raddatz referenced “the heart-breaking video of a 5-year-old Syrian boy named Omran sitting in an ambulance after being pulled from the rubble after an air strike in Aleppo,” she seems to have no similar sympathy for the slaughtered and maimed children of Iraq who suffered under American bombs - or the people of Yemen who have faced a prolonged aerial onslaught from Saudi Arabia using U.S. aircraft and U.S.-supplied ordnance.

Regarding Iraq, there was the case at the start of the U.S.-led war when President George W. Bush mistakenly thought Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein might be eating at a Baghdad restaurant so U.S. warplanes leveled it, killing more than a dozen civilians, including children and a young woman whose headless body was recovered by her mother.

“When the broken body of the 20-year-old woman was brought out torso first, then her head,” the Associated Press reported, “her mother started crying uncontrollably, then collapsed.” The London Independent cited this restaurant attack as one that represented “[a clear breach](#)” of the Geneva Conventions ban on bombing civilian targets.

But such civilian deaths were of little interest to the mainstream U.S. media. “American talking heads ... never seemed to give the issue any thought,” wrote Eric Boehlert in a report on the U.S. war coverage for [Salon.com](#). “Certainly they did not linger on images of the hellacious human carnage left in the aftermath.”

Thousands of other civilian deaths were equally horrific. Saad Abbas, 34, was wounded in an American bombing raid, but his family sought to shield him from the greater horror. The bombing had killed his three daughters Marwa, 11; Tabarek, 8; and Safia, 5 who had been the center of his life. “It wasn’t just ordinary love,” his wife said. “He was crazy about them. It wasn’t like other fathers.” [NYT, April 14, 2003]

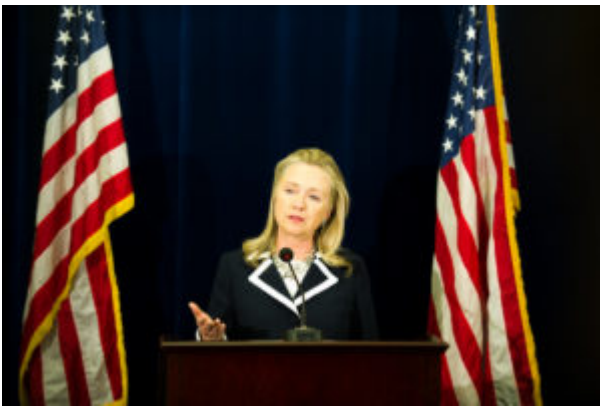
The horror of the war was captured, too, in the fate of 12-year-old Ali Ismaeel Abbas, who lost his two arms when a U.S. missile struck his Baghdad home. Ali’s father, his pregnant mother and his siblings were all killed. As the armless Ali was evacuated to a Kuwaiti

hospital, becoming a symbol of U.S. compassion for injured Iraqi civilians, the boy said he would rather die than live without his hands.

Because of the horrors inflicted on Iraq – and the resulting chaos that has now spread across the region and into Europe – Raddatz could have asked Clinton, who as a U.S. senator voted for the illegal war, whether she felt any responsibility for this carnage. Of course, Raddatz would not ask that question because the U.S. mainstream media was almost universally onboard the Iraq War bandwagon, which helps explain why there has been virtually no accountability for those war crimes.

Letting Clinton Off

So, Clinton was not pressed on her war judgments regarding either Iraq or the Libyan “regime change” that she championed in 2011, another war of choice that transformed the once-prosperous North African nation into a failed state. Raddatz’s biased framing also put Republican Donald Trump on the defensive for resisting yet another American “regime change” project in Syria.



Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at a press conference on Sept. 9, 2012. (State Department photo)

Trump was left muttering some right-wing talking points that sought to attack Clinton as soft on Syria, trying to link her to President Barack Obama’s decision not to bomb the Syrian military in August 2013 after a mysterious sarin gas attack outside Damascus, which occurred six months after Clinton had resigned as Secretary of State.

Trump: “She was there as Secretary of State with the so-called line in the sand, which...

Clinton: “No, I wasn’t. I was gone. I hate to interrupt you, but at some point...

Trump: “OK. But you were in contact — excuse me. You were...

Clinton: “At some point, we need to do some fact-checking here.

Trump: “You were in total contact with the White House, and perhaps, sadly, Obama probably still listened to you. I don’t think he would be listening to you very much anymore. Obama draws the line in the sand. It was laughed at all over the world what happened.”

In bashing Obama for not bombing Syria – after U.S. intelligence expressed suspicion that the sarin attack was actually carried out by Al Qaeda or a related group trying [to trick the U.S. military into attacking the Syrian government](#) – Trump may have pleased his right-wing

base but he was deviating from his generally less war-like stance on the Middle East.

He followed that up with [another false right-wing claim](#) that Clinton and Obama had allowed the Russians to surge ahead on nuclear weapons, saying: “our nuclear program has fallen way behind, and they’ve gone wild with their nuclear program. Not good.”



Billionaire and Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump.

Only after attacking Clinton for not being more militaristic did Trump say a few things that made sense, albeit in his incoherent snide-aside style.

Trump: “Now, she talks tough, she talks really tough against Putin and against Assad. She talks in favor of the rebels. She doesn’t even know who the rebels are. You know, every time we take rebels, whether it’s in Iraq or anywhere else, we’re arming people. And you know what happens? They end up being worse than the people [we overthrow].

“Look at [what she did in Libya](#) with [Muammar] Gaddafi. Gaddafi’s out. It’s a mess. And, by the way, ISIS has a good chunk of their oil. I’m sure you probably have heard that.” [Actually, whether one has heard it or not, that point is not true. During the ongoing political and military strife, Libya has been blocked from selling its oil, which is shipped by sea.]

Trump continued: “It was a disaster. Because the fact is, almost everything she’s done in foreign policy has been a mistake and it’s been a disaster.

“But if you look at Russia, just take a look at Russia, and look at what they did this week, where I agree, she wasn’t there, but possibly she’s consulted. We sign a peace treaty. Everyone’s all excited. Well, what Russia did with Assad and, by the way, with Iran, who you made very powerful with the dumbest deal perhaps I’ve ever seen in the history of deal-making, [the Iran deal](#), with the \$150 billion, with the \$1.7 billion in cash, which is enough to fill up this room.

“But look at that deal. Iran now and Russia are now against us. So she wants to fight. She wants to fight for rebels. There’s only one problem. You don’t even know who the rebels are. So what’s the purpose?”

While one can’t blame Raddatz for Trump’s scattered thinking – or for Clinton’s hawkishness – the moderator’s failure to frame the Syrian issue in a factual and nuanced way contributed to this dangerously misleading “debate” on a grave issue of war and peace.

It is surely not the first time that the mainstream U.S. media has failed the American people in this way, but – given the stakes of a possible nuclear war with Russia – this propagandistic style of “journalism” is fast becoming an existential threat.

*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](#)).*

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