

Spoiling for a Wider War in Syria

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*The U.S. mainstream media's near universal demonization of Syrian **President Bashar al-Assad** and Russian **President Vladimir Putin** – along with similar hatred directed toward Iran and Hezbollah – has put the world on a path toward World War III.*

Ironically, the best hope for averting a dangerous escalation into a global conflict is to rely on Assad, Putin, Iran and Hezbollah to show restraint in the face of illegal military attacks by the United States and its Mideast allies inside Syria.

In other words, after the U.S. military has bombed Syrian government forces on their own territory and shot down a Syrian warplane on Sunday – and after Israel has launched its own strikes inside Syria and after Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies have financed and armed jihadists to overthrow Assad – it is now up to the Syrian government and its allies to turn the other cheek.

Of course, there is also a danger that comes from such self-control, in that it may encourage the aggressors to test the limits even further, seeing restraint as an acceptance of their impunity and a reason to ignore whatever warnings are issued and red lines drawn.



The guided-missile destroyer USS Porter conducts strike operations against a Syrian military airbase while in the Mediterranean Sea, April 7, 2017. (Navy photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Ford Williams)

Indeed, if you follow The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal and

other big U.S. news outlets, perhaps the most striking groupthink that they all share is that the U.S. government and its allies have the right to intervene militarily anywhere in the world. Their slogan could be summed up as: “International law – that’s for the other guy!”

In this upside-down world of American hegemony, Assad becomes the “aggressor” when he seeks to regain control of Syrian territory against armed insurgents, dominated by Al Qaeda and Islamic State (ISIS), or when he protests the invasion of Syrian territory by foreign forces.

When Assad legally seeks help from Russia and Iran to defeat these foreign-armed and foreign-backed jihadists, the U.S. mainstream media and politicians treat his alliances as improper and troublemaking. Yet, the uninvited interventions into Syria by the United States and its various allies, including Turkey and Israel, are treated as normal and expected.

Demanding Escalation

The preponderance of U.S. media criticism about U.S. policy in Syria comes from neoconservatives and liberal interventionists who have favored a much more ambitious and vigorous “regime change” war, albeit cloaked in prettier phrases such as “safe zones” and “no-fly zones.”

So, you have Tuesday’s Wall Street Journal editorial, which praises Sunday’s U.S. shoot-down of a Syrian military plane because it allegedly was dropping bombs “near” one of the U.S.-backed rebel groups – though the Syrians say they were targeting an Islamic State position.

Although it was the U.S. that shot down the Syrian plane over Syria, the Journal’s editorial portrays the Russians and Syrians as the hotheads for denouncing the U.S. attack as a provocation and warning that similar air strikes will not be tolerated.

In response, the Journal’s neocon editors called for more U.S. military might hurled against Syria and Russia:

“The risk of escalation is real, but this isn’t a skirmish the U.S. can easily avoid. Mr. Assad and his allies in Moscow and Tehran know that ISIS’s days are numbered. They want to assert control over as much territory as possible in the interim, and that means crushing the SDF [the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces].

“The Russian threat on Monday to target with anti-aircraft missiles any U.S. aircraft flying west of the Euphrates River in Syria is part of the same intimidation strategy. Russia also suspended a hotline between the two armed forces designed to reduce the risk of a military mistake. Iran, which arms and assists Mr. Assad on the ground, vowed further Syrian regime attacks against SDF, all but daring U.S. planes to respond amid the Russian threat.

“The White House and Pentagon reacted with restraint on Monday, calling for a de-escalation and open lines of communication. But if Syria and its allies are determined to escalate, the U.S. will either have to back down or prepare a more concerted effort to protect its allies and now U.S. aircraft.

“This is a predicament **President Obama** put the U.S. in when his Syrian abdication created an opening for Vladimir Putin to intervene. Had the U.S. established a no-fly or other

safe zone to protect refugees, the Kremlin might have been more cautious.”



Nikki Haley, United States Permanent Representative to the UN, addresses the Security Council’s meeting on the situation in Syria on April 27, 2017 (UN Photo)

As senior U.S. commanders have explained, however, the notion of a sweet-sounding “no-fly or other safe zone” would require a massive U.S. military campaign inside Syria that would devastate government forces and result in thousands of civilian deaths because many air defenses are located in urban areas. It also could lead to a victory for Al Qaeda and/or its spinoff, Islamic State, a grisly fate for most Syrians.

Propaganda Value

But the “safe zone” illusion has great propaganda value, essentially a new packaging for another “regime change” war, which the neocons lusted for in Syria as the follow-on to the Iraq invasion in 2003 but couldn’t achieve immediately because the Iraq War turned into a bloody disaster.

Instead, the neocons had to settle for a proxy war on Syria, funded and armed by the U.S. government and its regional allies, relying on violent jihadists to carry out the brunt of the fighting and killing. When Assad’s government reacted clumsily to this challenge, the U.S. mainstream media depicted Assad as the villain and the “rebels” as the heroes.

In 2012, the Defense Intelligence Agency, then under the direction of **Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn**, [warned](#) that the U.S. strategy would give rise to “a declared or undeclared Salafist principality in eastern Syria.”

Flynn went further in a 2015 [interview](#) when he said the intelligence was “very clear” that the Obama administration made a “willful decision” to back these jihadists in league with Middle East allies. (Flynn briefly served as **President Trump**’s national security adviser but was ousted amid the growing Russia-gate “scandal.”)

Only in 2014, when Islamic State militants began decapitating American hostages and capturing cities in Iraq, did the Obama administration reverse course and begin attacking ISIS while continuing to turn a blind-eye to the havoc caused by other rebel groups allied with Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front, including many outfits deemed “moderate” in the U.S. lexicon.

But the problem is that almost none of this history exists within the U.S. mainstream

narrative, which – as the Journal’s neocon editors did on Tuesday – simply depicts Obama as weak and then baits President Trump to show more military muscle.

What U.S. National Interests?

The Journal editorial criticized Trump for having no strategy beyond eradicating ISIS and adding:

“Now is the time for thinking through such a strategy because Syria, Russia and Iran know what they want. Mr. Assad wants to reassert control over all of Syria, not a country divided into Alawite, Sunni and Kurdish parts. Iran wants a Shiite arc of influence from Tehran to Beirut. Mr. Putin will settle for a Mediterranean port and a demonstration that Russia can be trusted to stand by its allies, while America is unreliable. None of this is in the U.S. national interests.”



Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. (Source: Consortiumnews)

But why isn’t this in U.S. national interests? What’s wrong with a unified secular Syria that can begin to rebuild its shattered infrastructure and repatriate refugees who have fled into Europe, destabilizing the Continent?

What’s the big problem with “a Shiite arc of influence”? The Shiites aren’t a threat to the United States or the West. The principal terror groups – Al Qaeda and ISIS – spring from the extremist Saudi version of Sunni Islam, known as Wahhabism. I realize that Israel and Saudi Arabia [took aim at Syria in part to shatter “the Shiite arc,”](#) but we have seen the horrific consequences of that strategy. How has the chaos that the Syrian war has unleashed benefited U.S. national interests?

And so what that Russia has a naval base on the Mediterranean Sea? That is no threat to the United States, either.

But what is the alternative prescription from the Journal’s neocon editors? The editorial concludes:

“The alternative would be to demonstrate that Mr. Assad, Iran and Russia will pay a higher price for their ambitions. This means refusing to back down from defending U.S. allies on the ground and responding if Russia aircraft or missiles attempt to take down U.S. planes. Our guess is that Russia doesn’t want a military engagement with the U.S. any more than the U.S. wants one with Russia, but Russia will keep pressing for advantage unless President Trump shows more firmness than his predecessor.”

So, rather than allow the Syrian government to restore some form of order across Syria, the neocons want the Trump administration to continue violating international law, which forbids military invasions of sovereign countries, and keep the bloodshed flowing. Beyond that, the neocons want the U.S. military to play chicken with the other nuclear-armed superpower on the assumption that Russia will back down.

As usual, the neocon armchair warriors don't reflect much on what could happen if U.S. warplanes attacking inside Syria are shot down. One supposes that would require President Trump to authorize a powerful counterstrike against Russian targets with the possibility of these escalations spinning out of control. But such craziness is where a steady diet of neocon/liberal-hawk propaganda has taken America.

We are ready to risk nuclear war and end all life on the planet, so Israel and Saudi Arabia can shatter a "Shiite arc of influence" and so American politicians don't have to feel the rhetorical lash of the neocons and their liberal-hawk sidekicks.

*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](#)).*

Featured image: Friends of Syria

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