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Media Myths and Distortions

More NATO Aggression Against Syria?

by RICK STERLING

Syria will be an important subject of discussion at this week's [NATO Summit meeting](#) in Wales. The US and NATO powers will evaluate whether to expand air strikes against ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq & Syria) into Syria, whether to do it in cooperation with the Syrian government and whether to increase support to the "moderate" armed opposition. The US mainstream media and politicians have been beating the war drums with Republican Senator McCain calling for military escalation and Democratic Senator Feinstein criticising President Obama for being "too cautious".

There has been little mention of the fact that it is one year since the highly publicized chemical weapons attack in the Ghouta outskirts of Damascus. The same elements who are pushing for "regime change" military action now were doing so one year ago. Since then, the case that the Syrian government was responsible for the attack has been [effectively discredited](#). The diplomatically negotiated agreement to remove all Assad's chemical weapons has been [successfully implemented](#). One would think this would merit attention, but it has been widely ignored.

One good thing in the media this week is recognition that Libya is now in chaos. This is the country which was "liberated" by NATO bombing which led to the murder of President Ghadaffi and collapse of that government. Nine months ago a [plurality of Libyans said they are worse off](#) than before the regime change. It's very likely that even more Libyans are unhappy with their externally imposed regime change today. Three years ago NATO members were congratulating themselves on the air war against Libya. Now they are hopefully more sober as it goes public that Libya is in chaos, the airport shut down, competing extremists fighting for dominance, with one faction [enjoying themselves in the US Embassy swimming pool](#).

The Obama Administration is at another turning point where it may choose to escalate its aggression against Syria. Clearly Obama and team do not want to go solo. The dreams of a "New American Century" with unchallenged US dominance have been broken by reality in Iraq, Afghanistan and beyond. But the hounds of war and aggression are noisy and persistent.

As NATO begins to deliberate whether and how to escalate aggression against Syria, let's review some recent and long standing myths and lies about the Syrian conflict.

Myth #1.

Some articles and even the (current) Wikipedia entry for James Foley (journalist) claim that he was a prisoner of the Syrian military and that they turned him over to ISIS. This is in perfect keeping with the pervasive demonization of the Assad government. However it's false. A serious investigation into the disappearance of Foley is in the [May 2014 Vanity Fair](#). Foley was captured by Nusra Front (or allied rebels) in November 2012 and later transferred or sold to ISIS.

Myth #2.

Both [NY Times' Anne Barnard](#) and John McCain suggest or assert that the Syrian government has collaborated with ISIS. The "evidence" of this is that the Syrian Army did not actively attack ISIS in eastern Syria during the past year.

The reality is that Syrian Army needs to pick and choose its battles and priorities. They are weakened by over three years intense conflict resulting in [at least 65 THOUSAND Syrian army and militia deaths](#). For reference, the total US death count in Vietnam was 58 thousand and Syria today is one tenth the size of the US in the 1970's. In the past year the Syrian military has focused on confronting armed opposition in Aleppo (the largest city), Homs, outer Damascus and the Lebanese border area. The Syrian military has gained ground in each of these areas along with implementing the national "reconciliation" policy.

In the past two months, ISIS has gone on the offensive in eastern Syria and is pressing towards Aleppo and central Syria with US equipment and weaponry captured in Iraq. The battles have taken a heavy toll on both ISIS and the Syrian

military. According to rebel aligned Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), 346 ISIS fighters were killed in a four day assault on Tabqa Air Base near Raqqa. The fighting has been brutal with heavy losses on both sides.

Longtime Mideast journalist [Patrick Cockburn](#) writes, “A conspiracy theory, much favoured by the rest of the Syrian opposition and by Western diplomats, that Isis and Assad are in league, has been shown to be false.”

In contrast with the myth, ISIS has in fact been aided and abetted by US allies. This includes funds from [Saudi Arabia](#) and other Gulf countries, ideology and recruitment by Saudi media, transportation and safe haven through Turkey.

Myth #3.

It is usually claimed that the Syrian conflict is a civil war that started with peaceful protests in 2011. In reality the seeds of the conflict were planted much earlier. General [Wesley Clark's 2007 memoir](#) described plans for “regime change” in Syria and other countries. Also in 2007 [Seymour Hersh documented the US strategy of fomenting conflict](#) in Syria (and Iran) by working with Sunni extremists:

“The U.S. has also taken part in clandestine operations aimed at Iran and its ally Syria. A by-product of these activities has been the bolstering of Sunni extremist groups that espouse a militant vision of Islam and are hostile to America and sympathetic to Al Qaeda.”

When mass protests began in Syria they included [violent attacks and murders of police from the beginning](#). The situation was the same in other regions. Jesuit priest Father Frans Van Der Lugt was widely respected by Sunni Muslims and Christians in the Old City of Homs. He described the [start of the protests](#) thus:

“From the start, the protest movements were not purely peaceful. From the start I saw armed demonstrators marching along in the protests, who began to shoot at the police first. Very often the violence of the security forces has been a reaction to the brutal violence of the armed rebels.”

The conflict in Syria has been primarily instigated and continued by some of the world’s wealthiest and powerful governments. They make no secret and call themselves, with Orwellian chutzpah, the “Friends of Syria”. Their division of labor including who pays the [salaries of the rebel mercenaries](#), who supplies communication equipment, who does training and who supplies weapons. Thus the conflict in Syria is primarily a war of aggression using domestic and foreign mercenaries.

Myth #4.

It is often suggested the “moderate opposition” is popular, democratic and secular.

President Obama has recently proposed giving \$500 million to the “moderate opposition”.

Patrick Cockburn sums up the reality in the newly released book *“The Jihadis Return: ISIS and the New Sunni Uprising”*:

“It is here that self-deception reigns, because the Syrian military opposition is dominated by ISIS and by Jabhat Al Nusra, the official Al Queda representative, in addition to other extreme jihadi groups. In reality there is no dividing wall between them and America’s supposedly moderate opposition allies.”

This situation is not new. A [NY Times article](#) in summer 2012 discussed the hidden presence of Al Queda within the “Free Syrian Army”. When he read this, James Foley sent out a tweet linking to the article and pondering whether the photographed black flag was necessarily Al Queda. He did not recognize the flag and wondered whether it was “some misc jihadi group”. Ironically that was the unique flag of ISIS before it was widely recognized. The “misc jihadi” group is the one that would later murder him.



Foley's [last article](#) documented the overall unpopularity of the rebels in Aleppo:

“Aleppo, a city of about 3 million people, was once the financial heart of Syria. As it continues to deteriorate, many civilians here are losing patience with the increasingly violent and unrecognizable opposition — one that is hampered by infighting and a lack of structure, and deeply infiltrated by both foreign fighters and terrorist groups.”

Myth #5.

Finally there is the myth that the Free Syrian Army and other “moderate opposition” groups were not supported. In reality, huge quantities of weapons and ammunition have flowed which is exactly what has allowed the terrorist organizations to continue the mayhem and bloodshed. Starting in November 2012 [three thousand TONS of weapons and ammunition](#) were flown from Zagreb to Turkey and then transferred to the Syrian rebels. In addition there were [huge shipments from Benghazi Libya](#) and more shipments paid by Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

DO USA AND NATO REALLY WANT TO STOP ISIS?

One week after the Syrian Presidential election where 73% of the electorate turned out, ISIS made its advance through western Iraq to Mosul and other cities. There were virtually no battles. Iraqi military leadership simply departed and in the confusion troops fled or disbanded. Was this a military collapse or was it planned, with key Iraqi figures either bribed or otherwise in alliance with ISIS? Whichever is the truth, we can see the consequences and who has benefited: the campaign for greater autonomy in the oil rich Kurdish region has advanced; the split between Shia and Sunni has been exacerbated; and one of the world's greatest overnight military arms transfers took place with ISIS effortlessly taking control of vehicles, humvees, tanks, lethal mortar launchers, high grade military equipment and tons of ammunition.

Did US military officers, who spent years and billions of dollars “training” the Iraqi military, have advance notice or knowledge of this seeming collusion between ISIS and Iraqi military officers? Did wealthy enemies of Syria simply bribe the Iraqi officers? Was it a “collapse” or [is there much more behind this](#)? How can a few hundred jihadi militants traveling in new Toyota pickup truck convoys surprise and overtake military checkpoints and bases without a fight unless there was [collusion at the highest levels](#)?

Actions reveal more than words. If the US and NATO really are worried about ISIS they can and will implement measures such as the following:

- * shut down the [Jihadi Highway](#) through Turkey.
- * shut down safe haven and supply routes of ISIS and other terrorist groups in Turkey

* provide useful information from surveillance flights to the Syrian army which is doing the main on-the-ground fighting

* demand and check that Saudi Arabia and Qatar stop broadcasting TV programs featuring [hate speech which serve to recruit jihadis to join ISIS](#).

* demand and check that [Saudi Arabia](#) and Qatar implement measures to stop funding for ISIS through their banks and other financial operations.

Will the US and NATO take practical steps to counter ISIS or will they escalate their aggression against Syria, violating Syrian air space and looking for a pretext to impose a “no fly zone” as done in the disastrous aggressions against Iraq and Libya?

Will the US and NATO start a bombing campaign against ISIS in Syria which will ignite MORE support for the group in the Arab world?

Will they violate Syrian air space as a stepping stone to US bombing of Syrian army positions?

Or will the US and NATO resist the hounds of war and finally put aside the campaign of regime change against a secular, socialist inclined government that is supported by a big majority of its people?

Rick Sterling is a founding member of Syria Solidarity Movement. He can be contacted at rsterling1@gmail.com

<http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/09/03/more-nato-aggression-against-syria/>