

The New York Times and “human rights” imperialism in Syria

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In yet another piece of pro-war propaganda in the guise of “news,” the *New York Times* on Monday published a front-page lead article headlined “Starving Syrians in Madaya Are Denied Aid Amid Political Jockeying.” The piece was co-authored by Anne Barnard, Hwaida Saad and Somini Sengupta.

The article details starvation conditions in a number of besieged cities throughout Syria, focusing on the rebel-controlled city of Madaya, northwest of Damascus, which has been blockaded by Syrian government forces. It is typical of reports strategically displayed by the *Times* editors for the purpose of manipulating public opinion and overcoming popular anti-war sentiment.

Despite numerous accounts in the establishment press in recent days, the situation in Madaya remains murky. Photo images circulated on social media said to depict starving children in the city have been shown to be months old and to have been taken in other locations.

According to some sources, the rebels who control the city belong to Ahrar al-Sham, an Islamist militia which is fighting for the ouster of Assad alongside the al-Nusra Front, the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria, as well as the CIA-backed Free Syrian Army.

Speaking at the UN on Monday, US Ambassador Samantha Power, one the architects of the 2011 ouster and murder of Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi, seized on the reports of starvation in Madaya in the *Times* and other newspapers to denounce Assad and call for regime-change in Syria.

The *Times* article was published on the same day that a convoy of trucks entered Madaya to deliver food and medical supplies as part of a deal brokered by the UN, which included the delivery of emergency aid supplies to the government-controlled cities of Foua and Kfarya, which have been blockaded by Ahrar al-Sham.

While the article cites human rights violations by all sides in the Syrian civil war, it clearly places the onus on the Assad regime and its Russian backers. Barnard and company write, for example: “Since last fall, when Russia joined the fray, at least 16 health centers have been hit, and six aid groups have pulled out of Idlib Province, where the Islamic State has little presence but Syrian and Russian forces regularly bomb other groups that oppose President Bashar al-Assad.”

Further on, the authors write: “Critics say the United Nations, eager to keep the Syrian government on board for peace talks with opposition groups, is either selling out or getting played.”

The unstated political agenda that informs the article is the push for a significant escalation of the war, starting with the establishment of no-fly zones by the US and its allies and ending with the toppling of Assad and his replacement with a US puppet ruler. Barnard cites only anti-Assad forces, including a member of the Syria Campaign, an advocacy group started in 2014 with funding from Syrian-born British businessman Ayman Asfari, the billionaire chief executive of oilfield servicing company Petrofac. The group advocates “no-bombing zones” within Syria to protect rebel groups and a “negotiated transition,” i.e., the removal of Assad.

As the *Times*’ Beirut bureau chief, Barnard has played a key role in the newspaper’s coverage of the civil war in Syria since late 2011, writing article after article hailing the activities of various CIA-backed rebel groups and promoting the lie that Washington’s proxy forces in Syria are spearheading a democratic revolution.

Barnard has managed throughout her career to find herself strategically placed in those areas of the world where US imperialism was concentrating its efforts to

assert its interests, through overt or covert means. In addition to reporting on Syria, Barnard has reported for the *Times* on Libya, Lebanon, Haiti and Russia. She reported from Pakistan after the 9/11 attacks and was Baghdad bureau chief and Middle East bureau chief for the *Boston Globe* during the invasion and occupation of Iraq. She later made reporting trips to Iran.

The suffering of the residents of Madaya is only the latest humanitarian crisis seized upon by the “newspaper of record” to press for a general escalation of bombing and killing in the Middle East and the assertion of US hegemony throughout the region. It follows the now long-forgotten plight of the Yazidis on Mount Sinjar that was used to justify what President Obama presented as a temporary and limited intervention in Iraq in August 2014, and the siege of Kurdish Kobane later that year, which was used to justify the expansion of US bombing in Syria.

As for the supposed concern of the *Times* and Barnard for the well-being of the Syrian people, it is instructive to recall the crucial role the newspaper played in promoting and legitimizing the lies and pretexts (weapons of mass destruction, the fight against Al Qaeda, the pursuit of democracy) that were used by the American ruling class to justify the invasion and occupation that killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and devastated the country, and the identical role the *Times* played in promoting the wars for regime-change in Libya and Syria that have had similarly catastrophic consequences for the people.

The *Times* ran similar front-page lead articles by conduits of the CIA and Pentagon such as Judith Miller in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and other *Times* purveyors of state propaganda penned the same type of “news” articles in advance of the Libyan and Syrian wars.

The *Times* has repeatedly used its news pages to agitate for military escalation in the Middle East on the pretext of human rights. It published articles in 2013 supposedly “proving” that Syrian government forces had fired chemical weapons into the Damascus suburb of Ghouta, an event that was to serve as the casus belli for a US attack on the regime’s forces in the late summer and autumn of 2013. After the plans for war were temporarily shelved, articles appeared in other publications exposing the *Times*’ claims as fraudulent, most notably by investigative journalist Seymour

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