

New York Times vents recriminations over Syria debacle

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The offensive of Syrian government forces, backed by Russian air strikes, has cut off the main supply route for Western-backed “rebels” and is apparently poised to deal them a decisive blow in Aleppo, Syria’s largest city. This situation is provoking increasingly bitter recriminations within Washington and its vast military and intelligence apparatus over the debacle of the US regime-change operation.

The anger and mutual finger-pointing going on within the Pentagon and the CIA, as well as on Capitol Hill and in the White House, have found a particularly hysterical expression in a February 8 *New York Times* column by the newspaper’s international affairs columnist Roger Cohen, entitled “America’s Syrian Shame.”

Cohen denounces the Obama administration for pursuing a policy in Syria that amounts to “fecklessness and purposelessness,” together with “feeble evasions masquerading as strategy” and “awkward acquiescence to Moscow’s end game.”

The *Times* columnist continues: “Syria is now the Obama administration’s shame, a debacle of such dimensions that it may overshadow the president’s domestic achievements.”

The “shame,” according to Cohen, is not that Washington’s instigation of a sectarian civil war, in which it and its regional allies—Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar—financed and armed Al Qaeda-linked Salafist jihadi militias, has plunged Syria into a bloodbath. Rather, his criticism is that US imperialism failed to pursue a sufficiently aggressive policy.

He writes: “The president and his aides have hidden at various times behind the notions that Syria is marginal to core American national interests; that they have thought through the downsides of intervention better than others; that the diverse actors on the ground

are incomprehensible or untrustworthy; that there is no domestic or congressional support for taking action to stop the war or shape its outcome; that there is no legal basis for establishing ‘safe areas’ or taking out Assad’s air power; that Afghanistan and Iraq are lessons in the futility of projecting American power in the 21st century...”

All of this is anathema to Cohen, who, for at least the last quarter-century, has never met a US war of aggression or imperialist intervention that he did not like, from the dismemberment of Yugoslavia onward. He was a prominent advocate for the US war against Iraq, promoting, along with other *Times* reporters and columnists such as Judith Miller and Thomas Friedman, the lies that the government of Saddam Hussein had “weapons of mass destruction” and ties to Al Qaeda. As late as 2009, with the number of Iraqi lives lost estimated at 1 million and the country devastated, he wrote, “I still believe Iraq’s freedom outweighs its terrible price.”

He likewise promoted the 2011 US-NATO war against Libya as a humanitarian necessity. After the fall of Tripoli, he penned a triumphalist column entitled “Score One for Interventionism.” Nearly five years later, Libya is wracked by war between rival militias, its social infrastructure destroyed and millions of its people forced into exile.

It is worth considering Cohen’s indictment of Obama for his alleged failings. The US president is charged with believing that the “diverse actors on the ground” in Syria are “incomprehensible or untrustworthy.” In point of fact, the composition of the so-called rebels backed by Washington and its Middle Eastern allies is quite comprehensible. They are dominated by outfits like ISIS and the al-Nusra Front, Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate. That this presents certain tactical challenges is

hardly a surprise.

He accuses the Obama administration of concern over the lack of any “domestic or congressional support for taking action.” This exaggerates the administration’s “concern,” given its launching of the US-NATO war in Libya, the return of US troops to Iraq and the initiation of the regime-change operation in Syria, followed by the dispatch there of Special Forces troops, all in the face of popular hostility and in the absence of any congressional vote. However, widespread opposition to war combined with the UK parliament’s vote against British action in Syria did play a role in the 2013 decision to back away from a bombing campaign.

He goes on to chide the Obama White House for worrying about irrelevancies like the absence of any legal basis for “establishing ‘safe areas’ or taking out Assad’s air power.” Why should the United States be concerned with international law now? It did not stop it from illegally invading Iraq.

That creating “safe areas” or “taking out” Syrian government aircraft would inevitably lead to a clash between the US and Russia, two nuclear-armed powers, is not a concern for Cohen. Indeed, one suspects he would welcome such a development.

Cohen traces the downfall of US policy in Syria to Obama’s 2013 failure to carry through on his threat to treat the use of chemical weapons as a “red line” that would be answered with a US bombing campaign. That the case against the Assad regime fell apart rapidly amid evidence that the chemical attack on suburbs of Damascus had been the work of a “rebel” faction seeking to provoke just such an American intervention is of no consequence to Cohen. His charge is that Obama let a perfectly serviceable, albeit false, pretext for direct US intervention go unused.

Cohen’s denunciations of Obama’s policies reach their frenzied high point with the charge that “Obama’s Syrian agonizing, his constant what-ifs and recurrent ‘what then?’ have also lead [sic] to the slaughter in Paris and San Bernardino.”

Really? Bombing Damascus, the imposition of a no-fly zone or the successful toppling of the Assad regime would have dissuaded the attackers in France and California?

The reality is that both of these attacks—like the horrors in Syria itself—are the product not of Washington’s supposed inaction, but of the succession

of crimes carried out by US imperialism in the Middle East over the course of decades.

Assad did not send the killers into the streets of Paris or San Bernardino. In France, it was manifestly a case of “blowback” from Western support for the Islamist “rebels” in Syria. The facilitation of thousands of youth going there to fight in the Western-backed war for regime-change, some of whom joined ISIS—Washington’s Frankenstein’s monster—and similar organizations, inevitably led to the return of a section of Islamist fighters, bringing the mayhem back with them.

As for the couple who carried out the killings in San Bernardino, by all accounts their supposed radicalization began as a result of traveling to Saudi Arabia, Washington’s closest ally in the Syrian intervention, and developed through contact with al-Nusra, one of the principal fighting forces in the war against the Assad government.

While adopting the tone of an outraged liberal interventionist, concerned for the fate of the Syrians and devastated by Syria having become “the bloody graveyard of American conviction,” Cohen really speaks for an entirely different constituency. There are few, if any, journalists working in the US media today who function so directly and openly as a mouthpiece for CIA conspiracies, Black Op interventions and US wars of aggression.

In the case of Syria, the operation has gone sour. The CIA was heavily invested in its outcome, literally. According to the *Washington Post*, it allocated fully 10 percent of its budget to support for the Islamist “rebels.”

There are powerful factions within the American state who are angry over the lack of any apparent return on this investment. Cohen’s column serves as a warning that the repercussions will be enduring and will undoubtedly find expression in new and far bloodier explosions of US military aggression.



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