

New York Times “human rights” warrior Nicholas Kristof demands military escalation in Syria

David Walsh
15 August 2016

Columnist Nicholas Kristof has made a career at the *New York Times* pontificating as the newspaper’s most prominent advocate and guardian of human rights. But as politically conscious workers, intellectuals and young people around the world should know by now, when Kristof and the *Times* speak of human rights, they mean neocolonial war, mass killing and plunder.

In a column published August 11 (“Obama’s Worst Mistake”), Kristof once more urges a wider and bloodier US military intervention in Syria. In doing so, he neglects to mention that such a policy carries a very high risk of igniting a far more devastating regional and even global war.

The *Times* columnist’s new piece, like many of his old ones, is a concoction of hypocrisy, falsehood and self-delusion, all in the service of American imperialism’s geopolitical aims. Kristof first points to the estimate of 470,000 deaths in the five-year conflict in Syria. He associates that carnage with “war crimes” committed by the “Syrian and Russian governments.”

He thereby whitewashes the central role of the United States and the Obama administration in stoking the civil war and arming and funding the Al Qaeda-linked Sunni militias that serve as Washington’s proxy forces on the ground, carrying out massacres of Shiites and other minorities and terror bombings in government-held areas.

Kristof’s moral antennae unfailingly pick up the signals sent from CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia but fail to detect the cries and screams of victims of US missiles and bombs. He makes no mention of recent reports by human rights organizations of a sharp increase in US bombings of civilian targets in Syria, including attacks by US warplanes in late July of two ISIS-controlled villages, al-Ghandour and Tokhar, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of civilians. The massacre in Tokhar was the single most deadly bombing attack on Syrian civilians inflicted by any warring party since the conflict in Syria began in 2011.

Kristof asserts that the Obama administration has allowed “Syria’s civil war and suffering to drag on unchallenged,” and this supposed failure “has been his [Barack Obama’s] worst mistake,” casting “a shadow over his legacy.” He suggests that

US policy in Syria is analogous “to the indifference toward Jewish refugees in the 1930s, to the eyes averted from Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s, to Darfur in the 2000s.”

He complains that Obama hasn’t shown enough “American leadership.” He cites the opinions of various high-level state figures (retired four-star general James Cartwright, former secretary of state Madeleine Albright and Bush administration director of defense strategy Kori Schake) in support of measures such as establishing “safe zones,” i.e., no-fly zones, and grounding Syria’s Air Force by firing missiles from outside the country “to crater military runways to make them unusable.”

He notes, in passing, that “Cartwright... acknowledges that his proposal for safe zones carries risks and that the American public should be prepared for a long project, a decade or more.” The prospect of yet another one of the endless “wars of the 21st century” does not ruffle the *Times* columnist’s finely turned moral sensibilities.

All in all, Kristof argues that US government policy in regard to Syria at present amounts to misplaced “caution,” “nonchalance” and “inaction.”

Of course, Washington has hardly been inactive in Syria. The brutal civil war, which has killed hundreds of thousands and displaced millions, is the product of a US-led operation aimed at ousting the Assad regime, installing a puppet government and weakening Iranian and Russian influence.

The Obama administration felt obliged to pull back from a direct, large-scale military intervention in 2013, which had been prepared by a propaganda campaign based on false claims that the Syrian government was responsible for a chemical attack on civilians. He called off the planned assault due to a vote by the British parliament to abstain from the attack, internal divisions within the US state, and massive popular opposition to a new war. Kristof was among the media pundits who denounced Obama’s climb-down at the time and has remained a war-hawk critic of White House policy in Syria ever since.

He sides with “Hillary Clinton, Gen. David Petraeus and many others” who advocate “more assertive approaches,” i.e., a

full-scale air war, for starters.

American imperialism has spent billions, in league with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, to fund and arm Islamist militias and dispatch them to Syria to bring about regime change. Russian intervention, which Kristof notes has made matters in Syria “far more complex,” has dealt a blow to the Islamist forces, further outraging Kristof and company.

The “modest” measures Kristof and his co-thinkers propose—creating “safe zones,” in reality, no-fly zones prepared and maintained through massive bombing of Syrian military and civilian infrastructure (Albright terms them “humanitarian areas”)—would inevitably result in a sharp escalation of the fighting and very possibly a direct clash with Russia. The experience of Iraq, Bosnia and Libya has demonstrated that these measures are mere preliminaries to full-scale war.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in September 2015: “The establishment of such a [“safe”] zone was the pretext used in Libya to carry out a bloody air war in coordination with ground attacks by Washington’s Al Qaeda-linked proxies, culminating in the overthrow and murder of [Muammar] Gaddafi. Behind the talk of a ‘political settlement’ in Syria, the same fate is being prepared for Assad.”

Kristof was a particular enthusiast of the assault on Libya. His column, “Hugs from Libyans,” published on March 23, 2011, was an especially obscene example of the outlook that underpins his “human rights” imperialism. In that piece, Kristof celebrated the NATO bombing of Libya, concluding his wretched column: “I’ve seen war up close, and I detest it. But there are things I’ve seen that are even worse—such as the systematic slaughter of civilians as the world turns a blind eye. Thank God that isn’t happening this time.”

All of this was a grandiose, self-serving lie. The US and its allies attacked Libya because of oil. The results of the intervention have been catastrophic.

Here is a picture of the country in 2015/2016 provided by Amnesty International:

“The armed conflict continued. Forces affiliated to two rival governments, as well as armed groups, committed war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law and human rights abuses with impunity. Rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly were severely restricted. Detention without trial persisted; torture and other ill-treatment was common. Women, migrants and refugees faced discrimination and abuses. The death penalty remained in force; several former senior officials were sentenced to death after a deeply flawed trial.”

This is the product of what Kristof described in 2011 as “one of the few times in history when outside forces have intervened

militarily to save the lives of citizens from their government.” Now Libyans have to fear for their lives from several governments and numerous militias.

As Kristof admitted in 2011, perhaps revealing more than he meant to, “We’re more likely to intervene where there are also oil or security interests at stake.”

The *Times* journalist is one of the public faces of a shadowy network of media outlets and figures, NGOs, think tanks, “human rights” organizations and public relations firms behind which stands the military-intelligence apparatus as well as billionaires with money to burn. Its principal business is to manipulate public opinion. Its primary target is the affluent, socially liberal upper-middle class, including members of the pseudo-left organizations, who are easily worked into a froth by alleged violations of the rights of women or gays by regimes thousands of miles away—without fail, governments targeted by Washington for replacement with “friendlier” ones.

One often finds Kristof in the middle of efforts to disorient and confuse, using his special brand of moralizing smoke and mirrors. He led the public charge against Woody Allen in 2014, repeating unsubstantiated and unproven charges of child molestation, as part of the effort to whip up hysteria over such issues.

He has been active in inciting and encouraging racial politics. In 2014, Kristof published a series of articles, “When Whites Just Don’t Get It,” in the wake of the police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and subsequent protests. The essential thrust of Kristof’s insistence on “a wrenching, soul-searching excavation of our national soul” was that “white America” was racist (one of the parts of the series was entitled “Is Everyone a Little Bit Racist?”). The *Times* columnist encouraged his readers to take a free online implicit association test that would prove to them how backward and prejudiced they really were.

It is no accident that Kristof’s latest exercise in war mongering in the name of humanitarianism comes in the aftermath of the Republican and Democratic conventions. The Democratic event, in particular, was the signal for a presidential campaign focused on the demonization of Russian President Vladimir Putin and preparation of a massive escalation of war in the Middle East and North Africa as well as stepped-up military provocations against nuclear-armed Russia and China.

Kristof, a true accomplice to war crimes, is doing his best to pave the way for the military bloodbaths being plotted by his superiors in the State Department, the Pentagon and the CIA.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact