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From Afghanistan to Syria: Women's Rights, War Propaganda and the CIA

By Julie Lévesque

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Women's rights are increasingly heralded as a useful propaganda device to further imperial designs.

Western heads of state, UN officials and military spokespersons will invariably praise the humanitarian dimension of the October 2001 US-NATO led invasion of Afghanistan, which allegedly was to fight religious fundamentalists, help little girls go to school, liberate women subjected to the yoke of the Taliban.

The logic of such a humanitarian dimension of the Afghan war is questionable. Lest we forget, Al Qaeda and the Taliban were supported from the very outset of the Soviet-Afghan war by the US, as part of a CIA led covert operation.

As described by the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA):

The US and her allies tried to legitimize their military occupation of Afghanistan under the banner of "bringing freedom and democracy for Afghan people". But as we have experienced in the past three decades, in regard to the fate of our people, the US government first of all considers her own political and economic interests and has empowered and equipped the most traitorous, anti-democratic, misogynist and corrupt fundamentalist gangs in Afghanistan.

It was the US which installed the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 1996, a foreign policy strategy which resulted in the demise of Afghan women's rights:

Under NSDD 166, US assistance to the Islamic brigades channelled through Pakistan was not limited to bona fide military aid. Washington also supported and financed by the U.S. Agency

for International Development (USAID), the process of religious indoctrination, largely to secure the demise of secular institutions. (Michel Chossudovsky, 9/11 ANALYSIS: From Ronald Reagan and the Soviet-Afghan War to George W Bush and September 11, 2001, Global Research, September 09, 2010)

Religious schools were generously funded by the United States of America:

Education in Afghanistan in the years preceding the Soviet-Afghan war was largely secular. The US covert education destroyed secular education. The number of CIA sponsored religious schools (madrassas) increased from 2,500 in 1980 to over 39,000 [in 2001]. (Ibid.)



Afghan women now. (AFP Photo / Shah Marai)



Afghan women in the 1970s before the CIA-led intervention

Unknown to the American public, the US spread the teachings of the Islamic jihad in textbooks "*Made in America*" developed at the University of Nebraska:

... the United States spent millions of dollars to supply Afghan schoolchildren with textbooks filled with violent images and militant Islamic teachings, part of covert attempts to spur resistance to the Soviet occupation.

The primers, which were filled with talk of jihad and featured drawings of guns, bullets, soldiers and mines, have served since then as the Afghan school system's core curriculum. Even the Taliban used the American-produced books...

The White House defends the religious content, saying that Islamic principles permeate Afghan culture and that the books "are fully in compliance with US law and policy." Legal experts, however, question whether the books violate a constitutional ban on using tax dollars to promote religion.

... AID officials said in interviews that they left the Islamic materials intact because they feared Afghan educators would reject books lacking a strong dose of Muslim thought. The agency removed its logo and any mention of the U.S. government from the religious texts, AID spokeswoman Kathryn Stratos said.

"It's not AID's policy to support religious instruction," Stratos said. "But we went ahead with this project because the primary purpose . . . is to educate children, which is predominantly a secular activity."

... Published in the dominant Afghan languages of Dari and Pashtun, the textbooks were developed in the early 1980s under an AID grant to the University of Nebraska -Omaha and its Center for Afghanistan Studies. The agency spent \$ 51 million on the university's education programs in Afghanistan from 1984 to 1994." (Washington Post, 23 March 2002)

Historical Flashback

Before the Taliban came to power, Afghan women lived a life in many ways similar to that of Western women (see pictures below):



In the 1980s, Kabul was "a cosmopolitan city. Artists and hippies flocked to the capital. Women studied agriculture, engineering and business at the city's university. Afghan women held

government jobs.” There were female members of parliament, and women drove cars, and travelled and went on dates, without needing to ask a male guardian for permission.

Ironically, the rights of women as described by RAWA prior to the US sponsored jihadist insurgency is confirmed in a 2010 article published by Foreign Policy (2010), a Washington Post mouthpiece founded by Samuel Huntington:



“Kabul University students changing classes. Enrollment has doubled in last four years.”

The physical campus of Kabul University, pictured here, does not look very different today. But the people do. In the 1950s and '60s, students wore Western-style clothing; young men and women interacted relatively freely. Today, women cover their heads and much of their bodies, even in Kabul. A half-century later, men and women inhabit much more separate worlds.



“Biology class, Kabul University.”

In the 1950s and '60s, women were able to pursue professional careers in fields such as medicine. Today, schools that educate women are a target for violence, even more so than five or six years ago.



“Phonograph record store.”

So, too, were record stores, bringing the rhythm and energy of the Western world to Kabul teenagers.



“Hundreds of Afghan youngsters take active part in Scout programs.”

Afghanistan once had Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. In the 1950s and '60s, such programs were very similar to their counterparts in the United States, with students in elementary and middle

schools learning about nature trails, camping, and public safety. But scouting troops disappeared entirely after the Soviet invasions in the late 1970s. (Mohammad Qayoumi Once Upon a Time in Afghanistan..., Foreign Policy, May 27, 2010)

The acute reader will have noticed the insidious disinformation in the previous caption. We are led to believe that the liberal lifestyle of Afghan women was destroyed by the Soviet Union, when in fact it was the result of US support to Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Acknowledged by US foreign policy Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, Moscow's action in support of the Kabul pro-Soviet government was to counter the Islamist Mujahedin insurgency supported covertly by the CIA:

Indeed, it was July 3, 1979 that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention [...]

That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter. We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam war. (The CIA's Intervention in Afghanistan, *Nouvel Observateur*, 1998, Global Research, October 15, 2001)

In 1982, President Ronald Reagan even dedicated the space shuttle Columbia to the US supported Islamist "freedom fighters" in Afghanistan, namely Al Qaeda and the Taliban:

Just as Columbia we think represents man's finest aspirations in the field of science and technology, so too does the struggle of the Afghan people represent man's highest aspirations for freedom.



Ronald Reagan meeting with the Taliban in 1985: "These gentlemen (the Taliban) are the moral equivalents of America's founding fathers."

Yet, both the US and the governments of NATO members claim the US-NATO military presence in Afghanistan was instrumental in promoting women's rights. The fact of the matter is that those rights were abolished by the US-backed Taliban regime which came to power with the support of Washington.

The US State Department's Syrian Women's Network

How does the history of women in Afghanistan relate to women's rights in Syria in the context of the current crisis?

The undeclared US-NATO war on Syria (2011-2013) in support of Al Qaeda affiliated rebels appears to have a similar logic, namely the destruction of secular education and the demise of women's rights.

Will Syrian women be facing the same grim future as that of Afghan women under the Taliban regime?

Last January, "a diverse group of Syrian women" said to be "representing the leading opposition movements" attended a conference hosted by the Women's Democracy Network (WDN), in coordination with the U.S. Department of State's Office of Global Women's Issues in Doha, Qatar.

WDN is an initiative of the International Republican Institute, well-known for supporting dissidents in various countries defying US imperialism. The US State Department is clearly using "women's rights" as a tool, while at the same time it is funding an Islamist "opposition" with a view to undermining the secular state and eventually installing an Islamist government in Damascus.

The Syrian Women's Network was formed at the US-sponsored conference and a Charter was written "to ensure women are included in the conflict resolution and transition of their country":

In the charter, participants call for equal rights and representation for all Syrians, demanding equal participation of women at all international meetings, negotiations, constitution drafting and reconciliation committees and in elected governing bodies. The charter also covers topics including prevention of and prosecution for acts of violence against women, access to education and the overall need for women's participation in ongoing conflict resolution while ensuring women's future participation in the rebuilding of Syria. U.S. government leaders also participated in the conference, underscoring their support of the Syrian women [...] In her remarks, Carla Koppell, senior coordinator for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment at the United States Agency for International Development [USAID], advised, "If the most diverse group of women can find a common agenda, it will have enormous strength." (Women Demand Role in Syria's Transition and Reconciliation, January 28, 2013, emphasis added.)



Monica McWilliams, founder of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition (left) and Deputy Prime Minister of Kosovo Edita Tahiri (right) share their experiences with participants of a conference in Doha, Qatar, where Charter of the Syrian Women’s Network was adopted by a diverse group of Syrian women representing the leading opposition movements in the country.(Photo from wdn.org)

The first striking paradox of this conference is that it is being held in Qatar, a country where women’s rights remain limited, to say the least. In mid-March, the Qatar government even expressed concerns “about references to women’s sexual and reproductive rights“ which are contained in the UN Declaration of the Commission on the Status of Women called Elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls.

Second paradox: USAID, which contributed to the demise of women’s rights by promoting religious indoctrination in Afghanistan, is now promoting women’s rights to bring about regime change in Syria. In the meantime, the US along with Qatar and Saudi Arabia is supporting Islamist extremist groups fighting against the secular Syrian government. Some so-called “liberated areas” in Syria are now run by religious extremists:

“Religious Wahhabi school and women’s rights in a ‘liberated’ area of Aleppo run by the US-Saudi backed ‘opposition’, ‘a definite improvement’ when compared to the prevailing system of secular education in Syria.” (Michel Chossudovsky, Syria: Women’s Rights and Islamist Education in a “Liberated” Area of Aleppo, Global Research, March 27, 2013.)

Were a US proxy regime to be installed in Damascus, the rights and liberties of Syrian women might well be following the same “*freedom-threatening path*” as that of Afghan women under the US-backed Taliban regime and continuing under the US-NATO occupation.