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## The Banality of Empire

### Oil, Politics and the Road to Damascus

by JASON HIRTHLER

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You have to ask: does Syrian President Bashar al-Assad have a death wish, launching a chemical attack within miles of a U.N. chemical inspection team? He must. Like those cloistered mullahs in Qom, whom Zionist sage Benjamin Netanyahu claims would fire a nuclear warhead at Tel Aviv the moment one fell into their hands, a mere *fait accompli*. Even though Iran would be instantly vaporized by American WMDs. Even though all those coiling spires would turn to dust. Because, as Bibi makes clear, you have to set aside the survival instinct when you're dealing with madmen.

#### Framing the Enemy

Assad, of that nefarious Alawite sect, must have similar dementia, since according to the Obama administration he launched a chemical weapons attack on Syrian "rebels" in Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus, at perhaps the most ill-advised moment in the two-year conflict. A moment when Assad had just welcomed United Nations chemical weapons inspectors into his country to see whether accusations of a May chemical attack were true. The latest attack has generated a freshet of rhetorical fraud we haven't seen since the lofty height of the Bush administration, when Dick

Cheney was touring the Sunday talk shows waving his imminent-threat manifesto and sneering uncontrollably at spineless pacifists. It's Iraq all over again. Just like the fabricated charges against a fangless Saddam Hussein, Assad awaits the verdict of history—a false accusation, a war fever in the West, and then the falling skies. There's no preventing it. Nobody mainstream has bothered to point out that Assad would have to be suicidal to launch an attack with inspectors in-country, and with the use of chemical weapons being President Barack Obama's vaunted "red line" across which no sovereign Shi'ite government can cross.

### **Rebels in Desperate Straits**

On the other hand, there are plenty of perfectly reasonable pretexts by which the so-called "Free Syrian Army" might have launched a chemical weapons attack, as they likely did in May, according to Carla Del Ponte of the U.N. and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria. She has now suggested the latest attack may have again been launched by the rebels. Despite the support of al-Qaeda and their al-Nusra Front affiliates, who each want Assad gone for very different reasons, this mercenary melting pot has been ceding territory to Syrian government forces at an alarming rate in recent months. It would behoove them to stage a chemical attack that the Americans could quickly attribute to the Assad regime, and begin fueling the drones and launching destroyers. Otherwise, the government might subdue all the factions ranged against it, consolidate its power, and be that much more difficult to unseat. Better to conjure a crossed line from the dust of civil, sectarian, and proxy strife. Baseless accusations can then issue from the White House lawn, being loudly seconded in Tel Aviv, where lawmakers have just rubberstamped another bank of illegal settlements for prime West Bank real estate, while Palestinians refugees in Ramallah are shot in murky dust-ups with the IDF. Illegal interventions. Outlawed occupations. Suspect crackdowns. World conflicts in miniature are always afoot in the Knesset.

### **The Bi-Partisan Blueprint**

Regardless of the trigger mechanism, the administration seems intent on pushing through Donald Rumsfeld's old madcap blueprint for the Middle East, which involved toppling the governments of seven consecutive countries on the way to unchallenged dominion over Arab and Persian fossil fuels. Their eyes are on the prize. The rest is detail. It seems to make little difference to the Americans what becomes of Syria, only that Assad is overthrown, and the warlord that plants his flag atop the wreckage is hostile to Tehran and is willing to viciously put down any foolhardy bids for self-determination that might emerge from the populace. After all, the U.S. has left a trash bin of fallen monuments and blown infrastructures in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. If the entire Arab world is a flaming midden whose only functional entities are oil derricks, what cause for concern is that to our imperial chieftains? Let the Islamists slaughter each other on the peripheries of the bonfire while we vacuum every ounce of natural gas and petroleum from the core of the earth. (One conjures visions of Daniel Day-Lewis in *There Will Be Blood*, mocking his young evangelical rival and shouting, "I drink your milkshake!")

### **Revving Up the Propaganda Machine**

The more controversial actions of state always require a heavy dose of cheerleading from the press, the better to manufacture the consent of the general population, or at least seed enough doubt to prevent a riot. To that end, *The New York Times* is back in the organ well, lifting its chorus of fearmongering to new heights. *The Washington Post* is cranking up the shrill calls for intervention. The ‘Situation Room’ is firing on all cylinders. Fox News is delivering thumping polemics on how slow-footed Obama is on foreign policy. Liberals stare blankly from the sidelines while their “lesser evil” does another expert impression of the “greater evil”. Obama channels Clinton. Kerry channels Cheney. But this is par for the course; justification cometh before the sword. It feels like 2003 again. All we need is Judith Miller to surface with a source in the chthonian depths of the Assad administration. Or Colin Powell to crack open PowerPoint and lift a few hollow tube photos from Google. And for someone to climb into the bully pulpit and tell us in mournful tones that yes, yes, we must once again wage war on those nomadic savages pitching their tents above our God-given bounty.

#### **Four Steps to War**

What can you expect in the coming days and weeks? Here’s a sneak preview. It’s none too surprising, since the formula has been refined over decades. Its architects have their names inscribed on the walls of the White House, infamy emeritus. The model calls for Obama to undertake a series of anti-democratic and pro-war actions that will be reformulated as pro-democratic and anti-war:

\* First, he’ll ignore the people that elected him. He’ll cite some moral platitude from a posture of deep anxiety—the man of peace forced to confront the need for noble violence. His wrinkled brow will slowly morph into the steely eyed gaze of determination—the defender of liberty come to rescue the hapless Syrian proles. He’ll wave a flag of universal human rights, declare that actions have consequences, and point a heavy finger at Bashar al-Assad. Just nine percent of the American population want this. But Obama will be too transfixed by his moral crusade to take notice.

\* Next, he’ll ignore Congress. This is the formal equivalent of ignoring the people. But unlike laughing off a Reuters poll, disregarding the entire legislative branch of government will require some nuanced prose from the Department of Justice (DOJ). No problem. For the Libyan war, the DOJ asserted that the provision of guns, drone strikes, missile launchers, and other weaponry didn’t collectively amount to “hostilities.” Hence there was no war. Hence no need to bother with Congressional approvals.

\* Feeling more confident by the day, Obama will then ignore the United Nations. He and deputy John Kerry have already said it is too late for U.N. weapons inspectors in Damascus to investigate the new claim of chemical weapons abuse. They offered a smattering of nonsense about “corrupted” evidence, despite the fact that sarin can sit in the soil for months. In any case, the U.N. could normally be relied upon to roll over in the General Assembly and Security Council on war authorization, but for the annoying presence of Russia, finger poised above the veto button, awaiting for the Obama administration to ask the Security Council legitimate its belligerence. Russia, of course, is itself hiding behind a façade of shocked innocence, saying it was fooled by America on Iraq in 2003 and won’t be fooled again. This, too, is sophistry.

\* Then he'll bomb. Missiles will be fired from the safety of the Mediterranean or the comparative calm of high clouds. The missiles will target heavily populated areas in Damascus, much to our great leader's great regret. Images of wailing Muslims will dot the airwaves. NGOs will assemble lists of the collateral dead. The refugee count—already at one million—will climb toward two. And Syria, part of the cradle of civilization, will begin to resemble Iraq and Afghanistan and Libya in its kaleidoscopic mix of blasted infrastructures, sectarian slaughter, rampant abuse of women, genetic deformities in the birth population, and the steady buzz of Predators and Reapers policing the carnage from the sky.

But, in the end, the oil and gas will be ours, and in Washington, that's all that matters.