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How Neocons Destabilized Europe

By Robert Parry

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Exclusive: The neocon prescription of endless “regime change” is spreading chaos across the Middle East and now into Europe, yet the neocons still control the mainstream U.S. narrative and thus have diagnosed the problem as not enough “regime change,” as Robert Parry reports.

The refugee chaos that is now pushing deep into Europe – dramatized by gut-wrenching photos of Syrian toddler Aylan Kurdi whose body washed up on a beach in Turkey – started with the cavalier ambitions of American neocons and their liberal-interventionist sidekicks who planned to remake the Middle East and other parts of the world through “regime change.”

Instead of the promised wonders of “democracy promotion” and “human rights,” what these “anti-realists” have accomplished is to spread death, destruction and destabilization across the Middle East and parts of Africa and now into Ukraine and the heart of Europe. Yet, since these neocon forces still control the Official Narrative, their explanations get top billing – such as that there hasn’t been enough “regime change.”



U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on Aug. 30, 2013, claims to have proof that the Syrian government was responsible for a chemical weapons attack on Aug. 21, but that evidence failed to materialize or was later discredited. [State Department photo]

For instance, The Washington Post's neocon editorial page editor Fred Hiatt on Monday blamed "realists" for the cascading catastrophes. Hiatt castigated them and President Barack Obama for not intervening more aggressively in Syria to depose President Bashar al-Assad, a longtime neocon target for "regime change."

But the truth is that this accelerating spread of human suffering can be traced back directly to the unchecked influence of the neocons and their liberal fellow-travelers who have resisted political compromise and, in the case of Syria, blocked any realistic efforts to work out a power-sharing agreement between Assad and his political opponents, those who are not terrorists.

In early 2014, the neocons and liberal hawks sabotaged Syrian peace talks in Geneva by blocking Iran's participation and turning the peace conference into a one-sided shouting match where U.S.-funded opposition leaders yelled at Assad's representatives who then went home. All the while, the Post's editors and their friends kept egging Obama to start bombing Assad's forces.

The madness of this neocon approach grew more obvious in the summer of 2014 when the Islamic State, an Al Qaeda spinoff which had been slaughtering suspected pro-government people in Syria, expanded its bloody campaign of beheadings back into Iraq where this hyper-brutal movement first emerged as "Al Qaeda in Iraq" in response to the 2003 U.S. invasion.

It should have been clear by mid-2014 that if the neocons had gotten their way and Obama had conducted a massive U.S. bombing campaign to devastate Assad's military, the black flag of Sunni terrorism might well be flying above the Syrian capital of Damascus while its streets would run red with blood.

But now a year later, the likes of Hiatt still have not absorbed that lesson — and the spreading chaos from neocon strategies is destabilizing Europe. As shocking and disturbing as that is, none of it should have come as much of a surprise, since the neocons have always brought chaos and dislocations in their wake.

When I first encountered the neocons in the 1980s, they had been given Central America to play with. President Ronald Reagan had credentialed many of them, bringing into the U.S. government neocon luminaries such as Elliott Abrams and Robert Kagan. But Reagan mostly kept them out of the big-power realms: the Mideast and Europe.

Those strategic areas went to the “adults,” people like James Baker, George Shultz, Philip Habib and Brent Scowcroft. The poor Central Americans, as they tried to shed generations of repression and backwardness imposed by brutal right-wing oligarchies, faced U.S. neocon ideologues who unleashed death squads and even genocide against peasants, students and workers.

The result – not surprisingly – was a flood of refugees, especially from El Salvador and Guatemala, northward to the United States. The neocon “success” in the 1980s, crushing progressive social movements and reinforcing the oligarchic controls, left most countries of Central America in the grip of corrupt regimes and crime syndicates, periodically driving more waves of what Reagan called “feet people” through Mexico to the southern U.S. border.

Messing Up the Mideast

But the neocons weren’t satisfied sitting at the kids’ table. Even during the Reagan administration, they tried to squeeze themselves among the “adults” at the grown-ups’ table. For instance, neocons, such as Robert McFarlane and Paul Wolfowitz, pushed Israel-friendly policies toward Iran, which the Israelis then saw as a counterweight to Iraq. That strategy led eventually to the Iran-Contra Affair, the worst scandal of the Reagan administration. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “When Israel /Neocons Favored Iran.”]

However, the right-wing and mainstream U.S. media never liked the complex Iran-Contra story and thus exposure of the many levels of the scandal’s criminality was avoided. Democrats also preferred compromise to confrontation. So, most of the key neocons survived the Iran-Contra fallout, leaving their ranks still firmly in place for the next phase of their rise to power.

In the 1990s, the neocons built up a well-funded infrastructure of think tanks and media outlets, benefiting from both the largesse of military contractors donating to think tanks and government-funded operations like the National Endowment for Democracy, headed by neocon Carl Gershman.

The neocons gained more political momentum from the U.S. military might displayed during the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91. Many Americans began to see war as fun, almost like a video game in which “enemy” forces get obliterated from afar. On TV news shows, tough-talking pundits were all the rage. If you wanted to be taken seriously, you couldn’t go wrong taking the most macho position, what I sometimes call the “er-er-er” growling effect.

Combined with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the notion that U.S. military supremacy was unmatched and unchallengeable gave rise to neocon theories about turning “diplomacy” into nothing more than the delivery of U.S. ultimatums. In the Middle East, that was a view shared by Israeli hardliners, who had grown tired of negotiating with the Palestinians and other Arabs.

Instead of talk, there would be “regime change” for any government that would not fall into line. This strategy was articulated in 1996 when a group of American neocons, including Richard Perle and Douglas Feith, went to work for Benjamin Netanyahu’s campaign in Israel and compiled a strategy paper, called “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm.”

Iraq was first on the neocon hit list, but next came Syria and Iran. The overriding idea was that once the regimes assisting the Palestinians and Hezbollah were removed or neutralized, then Israel could dictate peace terms to the Palestinians who would have no choice but to accept what was on the table.

In 1998, the neocon Project for the New American Century, founded by neocons Robert Kagan and William Kristol, called for a U.S. invasion of Iraq, but President Bill Clinton balked at something that extreme. The situation changed, however, when President George W. Bush took office and the 9/11 attacks terrified and infuriated the American public.

Suddenly, the neocons had a Commander-in-Chief who agreed with the need to eliminate Iraq’s Saddam Hussein – and Americans were easily persuaded although Iraq and Hussein had nothing to do with 9/11. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[The Mysterious Why of the Iraq War](#).”]

The Death of ‘Realism’

The 2003 Iraq invasion sounded the death knell for foreign policy “realism” in Official Washington. Aging or dead, the old adult voices were silent or ignored. From Congress and the Executive Branch to the think tanks and the mainstream news media, almost all the “opinion leaders” were neocons and many liberals fell into line behind Bush’s case for war.

And, even though the Iraq War “group think” was almost entirely wrong, both on the WMD justifications for war and the “cakewalk” expectations for remaking Iraq, almost no one who promoted the fiasco suffered punishment for either the illegality of the invasion or the absence of sanity in promoting such a harebrained scheme.

Instead of negative repercussions, the Iraq War backers – the neocons and their liberal-hawk accomplices – essentially solidified their control over U.S. foreign policy and the major news media. From The New York Times and The Washington Post to the Brookings Institution and the American Enterprise Institute, the “regime change” agenda continued to hold sway.

It didn’t even matter when the sectarian warfare unleashed in Iraq left hundreds of thousands dead, displaced millions and gave rise to Al Qaeda’s ruthless Iraq affiliate. Not even the 2008 election of Barack Obama, an Iraq War opponent, changed this overall dynamic.

Rather than standing up to this new foreign policy establishment, Obama bowed to it, retaining key players from President Bush’s national security team, such as Defense Secretary Robert Gates and General David Petraeus, and by hiring hawkish Democrats, including Sen. Hillary Clinton, who became Secretary of State, and Samantha Power at the National Security Council.

Thus, the cult of “regime change” did not just survive the Iraq disaster; it thrived. Whenever a difficult foreign problem emerged, the go-to solution was still “regime change,” accompanied by the usual demonizing of a targeted leader, support for the “democratic opposition” and calls for military intervention. President Obama, arguably a “closet realist,” found himself as the foot-dragger-in-chief as he reluctantly was pulled along on one “regime change” crusade after another.

In 2011, for instance, Secretary of State Clinton and National Security Council aide Power persuaded Obama to join with some hot-for-war European leaders to achieve “regime change” in Libya, where Muammar Gaddafi had gone on the offensive against groups in eastern Libya that he identified as Islamic terrorists.

But Clinton and Power saw the case as a test for their theories of “humanitarian warfare” – or “regime change” to remove a “bad guy” like Gaddafi from power. Obama soon signed on and, with the U.S. military providing crucial technological support, a devastating bombing campaign destroyed Gaddafi’s army, drove him from Tripoli, and ultimately led to his torture-murder.

‘We Came, We Saw, He Died’

Secretary Clinton scurried to secure credit for this “regime change.” According to one email chain in August 2011, her longtime friend and personal adviser Sidney Blumenthal praised the bombing campaign to destroy Gaddafi’s army and hailed the dictator’s impending ouster.

“First, brava! This is a historic moment and you will be credited for realizing it,” Blumenthal wrote on Aug. 22, 2011. “When Qaddafi himself is finally removed, you should of course make a public statement before the cameras wherever you are, even in the driveway of your vacation home. ... You must go on camera. You must establish yourself in the historical record at this moment. ... The most important phrase is: ‘successful strategy.’”

Clinton forwarded Blumenthal’s advice to Jake Sullivan, a close State Department aide. “Pls read below,” she wrote. “Sid makes a good case for what I should say, but it’s premised on being said after Q[addafi] goes, which will make it more dramatic. That’s my hesitancy, since I’m not sure how many chances I’ll get.”

Sullivan responded, saying “it might make sense for you to do an op-ed to run right after he falls, making this point. ... You can reinforce the op-ed in all your appearances, but it makes sense to lay down something definitive, almost like the Clinton Doctrine.”

However, when Gaddafi abandoned Tripoli that day, President Obama seized the moment to make a triumphant announcement. Clinton’s opportunity to highlight her joy at the Libyan “regime change” had to wait until Oct. 20, 2011, when Gaddafi was captured, tortured and murdered.

In a TV interview, Clinton celebrated the news when it appeared on her cell phone and paraphrased Julius Caesar’s famous line after Roman forces achieved a resounding victory in

46 B.C. and he declared, “veni, vidi, vici” – “I came, I saw, I conquered.” Clinton’s reprise of Caesar’s boast went: “We came; we saw; he died.” She then laughed and clapped her hands.

Presumably, the “Clinton Doctrine” would have been a policy of “liberal interventionism” to achieve “regime change” in countries where there is some crisis in which the leader seeks to put down an internal security threat and where the United States objects to the action.

But the problem with Clinton’s boasting about the “Clinton Doctrine” was that the Libyan adventure quickly turned sour with the Islamic terrorists, whom Gaddafi had warned about, seizing wide swaths of territory and turning it into another Iraq-like badlands.

On Sept. 11, 2012, this reality hit home when the U.S. consulate in Benghazi was overrun and U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other American diplomatic personnel were killed. It turned out that Gaddafi wasn’t entirely wrong about the nature of his opposition.

Eventually, the extremist violence in Libya grew so out of control that the United States and European countries abandoned their embassies in Tripoli. Since then, Islamic State terrorists have begun decapitating Coptic Christians on Libyan beaches and slaughtering other “heretics.” Amid the anarchy, Libya has become a route for desperate migrants seeking passage across the Mediterranean to Europe.

A War on Assad

Parallel to the “regime change” in Libya was a similar enterprise in Syria in which the neocons and liberal interventionists pressed for the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad, whose government in 2011 cracked down on what had quickly become a violent rebellion led by extremist elements, though the Western propaganda portrayed the opposition as “moderate” and “peaceful.”

For the first years of the Syrian civil war, the pretense remained that these “moderate” rebels were facing unjustified repression and the only answer was “regime change” in Damascus. Assad’s claim that the opposition included many Islamic extremists was largely dismissed as were Gaddafi’s alarms in Libya.

On Aug. 21, 2013, a sarin gas attack outside Damascus killed hundreds of civilians and the U.S. State Department and the mainstream news media immediately blamed Assad’s forces amid demands for military retaliation against the Syrian army.

Despite doubts within the U.S. intelligence community about Assad’s responsibility for the sarin attack, which some analysts saw instead as a provocation by anti-Assad terrorists, the clamor from Official Washington’s neocons and liberal interventionists for war was intense and any doubts were brushed aside.

But President Obama, aware of the uncertainty within the U.S. intelligence community, held back from a military strike and eventually worked out a deal, brokered by Russian President

Vladimir Putin, in which Assad agreed to surrender his entire chemical-weapons arsenal while still denying any role in the sarin attack.

Though the case pinning the sarin attack on the Syrian government eventually fell apart – with evidence pointing to a “false flag” operation by Sunni radicals to trick the United States into intervening on their side – Official Washington’s “group think” refused to reconsider the initial rush to judgment. In Monday’s column, Hiatt still references Assad’s “savagery of chemical weapons.”

Any suggestion that the only realistic option in Syria is a power-sharing compromise that would include Assad – who is viewed as the protector of Syria’s Christian, Shiite and Alawite minorities – is rejected out of hand with the slogan, “Assad must go!”

The neocons have created a conventional wisdom which holds that the Syrian crisis would have been prevented if only Obama had followed the neocons’ 2011 prescription of another U.S. intervention to force another “regime change.” Yet, the far more likely outcome would have been either another indefinite and bloody U.S. military occupation of Syria or the black flag of Islamic terrorism flying over Damascus.

Get Putin

Another villain who emerged from the 2013 failure to bomb Syria was Russian President Putin, who infuriated the neocons by his work with Obama on Syria’s surrender of its chemical weapons and who further annoyed the neocons by helping to get the Iranians to negotiate seriously on constraining their nuclear program. Despite the “regime change” disasters in Iraq and Libya, the neocons wanted to wave the “regime change” wand again over Syria and Iran.

Putin got his comeuppance when U.S. neocons, including NED President Carl Gershman and Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland (Robert Kagan’s wife), helped orchestrate a “regime change” in Ukraine on Feb. 22, 2014, overthrowing elected President Viktor Yanukovich and putting in a fiercely anti-Russian regime on Russia’s border.

As thrilled as the neocons were with their “victory” in Kiev and their success in demonizing Putin in the mainstream U.S. news media, Ukraine followed the now-predictable post-regime-change descent into a vicious civil war. Western Ukrainians waged a brutal “anti-terrorist operation” against ethnic Russians in the east who resisted the U.S.-backed coup.

Thousands of Ukrainians died and millions were displaced as Ukraine’s national economy teetered toward collapse. Yet, the neocons and their liberal-hawk friends again showed their propaganda skills by pinning the blame for everything on “Russian aggression” and Putin.

Though Obama was apparently caught off-guard by the Ukrainian “regime change,” he soon joined in denouncing Putin and Russia. The European Union also got behind U.S.-demanded sanctions against Russia despite the harm those sanctions also inflicted on Europe’s already shaky economy. Europe’s stability is now under additional strain because of the flows of refugees from the war zones of the Middle East.

A Dozen Years of Chaos

So, we can now look at the consequences and costs of the past dozen years under the spell of neocon/liberal-hawk “regime change” strategies. According to many estimates, the death toll in Iraq, Syria and Libya has exceeded one million with several million more refugees flooding into – and stretching the resources – of fragile Mideast countries.

Hundreds of thousands of other refugees and migrants have fled to Europe, putting major strains on the Continent’s social structures already stressed by the severe recession that followed the 2008 Wall Street crash. Even without the refugee crisis, Greece and other southern European countries would be struggling to meet their citizens’ needs.

Stepping back for a moment and assessing the full impact of neoconservative policies, you might be amazed at how widely they have spread chaos across a large swath of the globe. Who would have thought that the neocons would have succeeded in destabilizing not only the Mideast but Europe as well.

And, as Europe struggles, the export markets of China are squeezed, spreading economic instability to that crucial economy and, with its market shocks, the reverberations rumbling back to the United States, too.

We now see the human tragedies of neocon/liberal-hawk ideologies captured in the suffering of the Syrians and other refugees flooding Europe and the death of children drowning as their desperate families flee the chaos created by “regime change.” But will the neocon/liberal-hawk grip on Official Washington finally be broken? Will a debate even be allowed about the dangers of “regime change” prescriptions in the future?

Not if the likes of The Washington Post’s Fred Hiatt have anything to say about it. The truth is that Hiatt and other neocons retain their dominance of the mainstream U.S. news media, so all that one can expect from the various MSM outlets is more neocon propaganda, blaming the chaos not on their policy of “regime change” but on the failure to undertake even more “regime change.”

The one hope is that many Americans will not be fooled this time and that a belated “realism” will finally return to U.S. geopolitical strategies that will look for obtainable compromises to restore some political order to places such as Syria, Libya and Ukraine. Rather than more and more tough-guy/gal confrontations, maybe there will finally be some serious efforts at reconciliation.

But the other reality is that the interventionist forces have rooted themselves deeply in Official Washington, inside NATO, within the mainstream news media and even in European institutions. It will not be easy to rid the world of the grave dangers created by neocon policies.