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<https://consortiumnews.com/2015/12/02/the-wests-deadly-mideast-fantasies/>

The West's Deadly Mideast Fantasies

By Mike Lofgren

December 2, 2015

Exclusive: Madness or at least self-deception now dominates the West's approach to the Middle East, with ostensibly rational leaders like Barack Obama and Francois Hollande fueling public hysteria about terrorism and pursuing "regime change" strategies proven to fail, as Mike Lofgren explains.

Around the time of the 2003 Iraq invasion and the silliness of "freedom fries" (served in the cafeterias of the House office buildings at the behest of ostensibly adult members of Congress), it was possible to believe that the nations of Europe were more sane about world events than panicked, suggestible Americans.

Then as now, the American public – and particularly its overclass of politicians, media personalities, and think-tank commandos – lurched drunkenly between chest-beating hubris about American military invincibility and the craven fear of small children listening to ghost stories. We were omnipotent, but somehow the faceless terrorists were as well.



U.S. President Barack Obama addresses the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 28, 2015.

Six decades ago, American journalist Garet Garrett diagnosed this bipolar syndrome as the characteristic behavior of a militaristic empire: “a complex of fear and vaunting.”

The Madrid train bombings of 2004 seemed to be evidence that Europeans were more level-headed. Despite 191 deaths, Europeans did not succumb to panic and turn their civic spaces into locked-down garrisons. Life went on, with people unterrorized and refusing to grant criminals the moral victory that comes when a society acts intimidated.

That was over a decade ago. Perhaps it was the successive shocks of the 2008 financial crisis, the euro currency crisis, the Greek crisis, the Ukraine crisis, and the refugee crisis that weakened the resistance of European governments and publics to contagious hysteria. The November 2015 Paris attacks (which killed fewer people than the Madrid bombings) have ignited a mental agitation equivalent to what Americans have been suffering under since 9/11.

After the attacks, French President François Hollande “declared war” on the so-called Islamic State, thereby granting it de facto nation status: the same strategic error that George W. Bush committed with respect to Al Qaeda after 9/11. In Belgium’s capital, fittingly the headquarters of the European Union and NATO, ordinary social life ground to a halt.

European and American attitudes appear to have converged. A decade ago, Americans were panicked over fantasies about yellowcake, aluminum tubes, and mobile biological warfare vans, but relatively indifferent to the Madrid attacks. Part of this was the natural belief that carnage in foreign countries is less alarming, but also the fact that the incumbent President Bush was the standard bearer of the persons most likely to become terrified and blame the President for whatever misfortune occurred in the world. They couldn’t very well scapegoat their own hero without suffering serious cognitive dissonance, so we heard not a peep from them.

Accordingly, “Bush’s brain,” Karl Rove, successfully waged the 2004 presidential campaign on the premise that Bush had “kept us safe,” insinuating against all reason that 9/11 was a harmless mulligan that in no way reflected on the President’s competence. Madrid was never a political issue; neither the Democrats nor the media raised it in a fashion that could negatively implicate Bush.

The Paris attacks, by contrast, have generated a major inflection point in the 2016 presidential campaign. GOP presidential candidates now talk about registering Americans by religion and bringing back torture. Sen. Marco Rubio sees the Paris attacks as a positive development insofar as it allows him to talk about being a foreign policy tough guy instead of being compelled to explain his shaky personal finances. A sitting member of Congress, Ann Wagner, R-Missouri, has accused President Obama of having “stood up for ISIS.”

One might have thought that the president of France would come here and tamp down the panic-mongering and cheap political theater. It is, after all, the expected role of worldly and cynical Europeans to admonish Americans when their panic-mongering becomes embarrassingly silly. But no.

Hollande’s and Obama’s joint White House press conference of Nov. 24 was marked, once they performed their required denunciation of ISIS, by the French president’s curious obsession with overthrowing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. We should make no mistake about it – all the talk from Western governments about a Syrian political “transition,” or suggestions that Assad “must go,” amounts, in the middle of a bloody civil war, to saying that Assad must be violently deposed.

Hollande has entered the same cloud cuckoo land inhabited by Bush when the latter, in the wake of Al Qaeda’s attacks on New York and Washington, claimed that the best way to defeat the religious fanatics of Al Qaeda was to invade the secular state of Iraq. Deposing Assad, the principal military opponent of ISIS, would be as monumentally idiotic as if the United States, on entering World War II, decided the most expeditious manner of conquering Nazi Germany would be to defeat Stalin’s Red Army.

But that is the official Syria policy of the United States, France, Britain and the other Western powers. Having whipped up public hysteria about jihadist terrorism (a scourge exacerbated by the West’s own previous military interventions), the finest minds of our NATO governments now propose to defeat it by overthrowing one of the few secular regimes in the Middle East, where Christians and other religious minorities have been protected.

Bashar al-Assad is likely a gangster. But when has that ever been a characteristic disqualifying one to be a partner of the United States government? Sisi of Egypt, Erdogan of Turkey, and the bloodstained tyrants who run Saudi Arabia are all members in good standing of the Washington Consensus. If Assad has signed his death warrant, it is because of his failure to sign onto that consensus, rather than any concrete misdeeds.

Assad has been content to rule his country and he makes no claims of universal jurisdiction based on some obscure religious hallucination. Who do Parisians or Londoners or New Yorkers believe is going to bomb their metro, underground or subway, or shoot up their restaurants: Assad or ISIS?

Yet surrealistically enough, members of the French media at the press conference, making overt political statements dressed up as questions, pressured the two heads of state for a timetable for

getting rid of Assad. (The European media, it appears, have become as shallow and uninformed as the American media, and are complicit in the derangement raging throughout the West).

Assad knows what is in store for him should Western desires prevail: the grisly fates of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi illustrate what “regime change,” Western style, entails. And one would have thought we might have learned from both misadventures that deposing a secular dictator does not bring Jeffersonian democracy in its wake.

The core of any sensible grand strategy is to reduce the number of your enemies while increasing the number of your allies, and to end a conflict on favorable terms that do not give rise to future conflict. Both the United States and Europe have declared ISIS to be a grave, existential and imminent threat. In so doing, they have incited fear in their publics and increased the potential of a domestic right-wing extremist backlash.

Yet these powers simultaneously pursue a senseless strategy designed to multiply the number of enemies – not only the Assad regime, but Russia and Iran – and all but guarantee strategic failure against the ostensible grave threat of ISIS. Dumping Assad all but assures that Syria in the long term will either be run by Islamist extremists or dissolve into an anarchic no-man’s land like Libya, regardless of Western fantasies about a “moderate” Syrian opposition.

It is said that the sleep of reason breeds monsters. On both side of the Atlantic, the monster of unreason has crawled out of the political id and is controlling foreign policy.