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A Clinton Win Means an Expanded War in Syria

By Daniel Larison
October 13, 2016

Michael Brendan Dougherty hopes Clinton is lying about her Syria policy:

And that is what is so nerve-wracking about the way that Clinton has now begun redefining America's mission in Syria once again. At first, Obama went over the top of public opinion to avenge American honor against ISIS. Slowly, America's mission has crept to include some form of regime change with the ouster of Assad. Now Clinton is selling the American people on greater military interventions so that the U.S. can challenge Putin.

Clinton seems unable to distinguish between what is of vital interest to the Russians and peripheral interest to America. She combines this with her bias toward always taking action — of any sort, for good or ill. The combination is dangerous. And it makes the Republicans' inability to field someone capable of challenging her intelligently on these terms even more egregious.

Unfortunately, we have every reason ^[2] to believe that Clinton intends ^[2] to escalate U.S. involvement in the Syrian war. She has repeatedly affirmed ^[3] that this is what she wants to do, her running mate agrees with her, and her likely advisers and Cabinet appointees ^[4] are at least as hawkish as she is. She isn't winning any votes by promising to risk confrontation with Russia there, but this has been her public position for well over a year ^[5]. She took that position again in

Sunday's debate. It is doing her no favors with progressives, but she hasn't hedged on her hawkishness in the slightest as a candidate.

We also can't dismiss this as nothing more than "tough" talk that doesn't tell us what she will do once she is president. The more hawkish her campaign rhetoric is, the more likely it is that she will be boxed in by it when she takes office. There is also the problem that there has been a steady drumbeat of demands for greater U.S. intervention in Syria for years, and Clinton routinely sides with the D.C. conventional wisdom on what the U.S. "must" do overseas. No matter what she says about force being a "last resort," no one thinks that she is reluctant to resort to force in a foreign conflict. Syria hawks that have wanted the U.S. to increase its role in the conflict will be pushing on an open door, and unless there is another public backlash like the one we saw in 2013 we should assume that Clinton will escalate in Syria sometime next year.

Leonid Bershidsky also finds ^[6] Clinton's approach to Russia disturbing:

I took part in the 2011 protests and I agree with Clinton's assessment of Putin. And yet I, too, think a Clinton presidency would be bad for Russia — and that would ultimately hurt the U.S. as well.

Clinton's positions on Russia are based on simplistic ideological lines.

Bershidsky sees Clinton as too inflexible and inclined to clash with Russia in both Syria and Ukraine, and that seems indisputable based on her past record and current positions. Because Clinton is on record supporting sending arms to Ukraine, there is real danger that the conflict there could get much worse if she follows through on that:

Poroshenko's fondest wish is to get lethal weapons from the U.S., but granting it would probably lead to an even more destructive and deadly phase of the now-frozen conflict. What will the U.S. do if Ukraine is overrun by Russian troops as a result? Neither Clinton nor anyone else in Washington has even discussed this possibility in public.

Advocates for arming Ukraine don't discuss this because it draws attention to the glaring flaw in their proposal that critics have been pointing out for months ^[7].

Noah Millman noted ^[8] the other day that one of the reasons that Clinton exaggerates the threat from Russia is her overall hawkishness, but he suggests it also could be because "she's an American primacist and therefore ideologically can't come to an accommodation with any other power about spheres of influence." I think both of those are correct. The danger of a Clinton presidency is that she really seems to believe the bromides about U.S. "leadership" in the world that she repeats, and she hasn't been and won't be shy about using force to put them into action. She has told us explicitly many times that this is what she means to do in Syria. If there is to be any chance of stopping that, that needs to be taken as a given and the opposition needs to start organizing now.

Obama opposed the Iraq war. He was elected in 2008 after running a campaign based on dovish rhetoric. He was predisposed to heed the antiwar backlash of 2013.

Clinton, on the other hand, has supported every war waged by the last three presidents – including the wars against Yugoslavia and Libya, which were initiated without congressional approval. Her campaign is replete with hawkish rhetoric. She welcomes the support of ultra-hawkish Republicans disgusted with Donald Trump’s foreign policy caution.

Two big donors recently demanded their money back from Donald Trump. They didn’t make this demand immediately after the Billy Bush tapes were leaked, they made this demand after Trump reiterated his cautious foreign policy during the debate. Journalist Mike Cernovich has sources who claim that the Billy Bush tapes were leaked by Dan Senor, Mitt Romney’s very hawkish foreign policy advisor.

The hawks are supporting Hillary Clinton because she promises to give them what they want – a war for regime change in Syria.

They are attacking Trump because he can’t be pressured into promising the same.