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Stop the Next President From Waging the Next War

By Zoltan Grossman
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Hillary Clinton now says her “number one priority” in Syria is the removal of Bashar al-Assad, putting us on the path of war with Syria and Russia next year. Whether or not you are voting for her, you should commit yourself to stopping her from this insanity, which President Obama wisely averted in 2013. Syria and Russia are indeed committing war crimes in Aleppo, but if you’re tempted to buy in to a “no-fly zone” or “humanitarian intervention” against Syrian, Russian, and Iranian forces, consider these ten facts and observations:

1/ We never hear about the atrocities committed by the Sunni rebel forces backed by the U.S., including the Al Qaeda-aligned Islamists that are now tacitly included in the rebel ranks. A sudden regime change in Syria will result in these forces being in charge, and fighting each other for power. Some victorious rebels would commit ethnic/sectarian cleansing against Alawites, Christians, and Kurds, causing many of these and other minorities to fear the rebels as much as

the Sunni majority fears Assad. Yes, the war can and will get even worse with more outside intervention.

2/ Any “no-fly zone” over Syria will certainly be followed by the shooting down of both Russian and U.S. jets, in an unpredictable escalation that could easily spread elsewhere in the region or world. Bombing Syrian/Russian forces would result in more civilian deaths, not fewer civilian deaths. In a leaked 2013 transcript, Hillary admitted, “To have a no-fly zone, you have to take out all of the air defense, many of which are located in populated areas. So our missiles, even if they are standoff missiles so we’re not putting our pilots at risk– you’re going to kill a lot of Syrians.”

3/ The U.S. is actively aiding Saudi bombing of Houthi rebels in Yemen, with devastation and civilian deaths that differs little from the Syrian/Russian bombing of Aleppo. The U.S. just directly launched missiles against the Houthis, embroiling us in a very dangerous part of the regional proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. State Department spokesperson John Kirby became tongue-tied when reporters asked him to define the difference between the Russian in Syria and the Saudis in Yemen.

4/ The U.S. has around 800 foreign military bases around the world. Russia has exactly two bases outside former Soviet territory—both of them in Syria. Putin is trying to emulate what the U.S. did in Iraq and Afghanistan, by establishing Russia as a regional and global power. Russia is doing exactly what the U.S. did in Panama—brazenly intervene in the affairs of a country that hosts its bases. The U.S. has zero legitimacy to criticize an upstart in global imperialism, or to demonize Russia for committing the same atrocities that U.S. forces did in Fallujah and elsewhere.

5/ Russia will not back down if we start shooting down its aircraft. Putin was the “Butcher of Grozny” in Chechnya (as the West turned a blind eye), and has intervened against nationalist governments in Georgia and Ukraine. He will pivot to somewhere else in the world—arming Iran, establishing a naval base in Egypt, or threatening Latvia. One way to lessen his popular appeal is to stop feeding into his nationalist propaganda that NATO is encircling Russia and tacitly backing fascists and ultranationalists on its borders. He only thrives politically when the West’s military pressure increases, and he can portray himself as standing up to NATO. Both Russia and Iran also thrive when U.S. and Israeli saber-rattling drives up global oil prices.

6/ The practice of “humanitarian intervention” upholds double standards that only highlight atrocities by the other side and not by U.S. allies. Bill Clinton’s bombings in Bosnia and Kosovo stopped ethnic cleansing by Serbian forces, but actively enabled ethnic cleansing by Croatian and Albanian militias. Obama’s bombing of Libya to supposedly “save” Benghazi ended up turning Libya into a free-fire zone. It wasn’t stepping in as a neutral party, but taking sides in a civil war and prolonging it. A real “humanitarian intervention” would order all sides to freeze in place, not attack one human rights abuser in favor of another.

7/ The U.S. seems to want to rubberstamp the partition of Syria into ethnic/sectarian enclaves as part of a “settlement,” just as it did in Yugoslavia and to a large extent in Iraq. Partition does not bring lasting peace, as the examples of Palestine and India demonstrate.

Regional autonomy is helpful to build peace, but communities and even families are too mixed together historically to allow for a “clean” territorial separation without massive violence and genocidal ethnic/sectarian cleansing. But it helps neoliberal capital to have large multiethnic states divided into more easily controllable mini-states.

8/ There have been many paths not followed in bringing peace to Syria since the genuine democratic revolution against Assad began in 2011. There has never been a choice between “doing something” and “doing nothing.” The U.S. and Israel could stop supporting Sunni Islamist rebels in return for Russia and Iran holding back the worst of Assad’s Alawite-led military atrocities, and *vice versa*. They could both support the Kurds’ valiant defense against ISIS, instead of selling them out (once more) to the Turkish military. They could engage with Syrian civil society that began the revolution, instead of only arming the militaries and militias. They could negotiate for a regional deescalation and coalition government that guarantees minority rights, and allows Syrians to focus on the real threats of ISIS and the economic ruin of war.

9/ The regime change in Iraq will look like small potatoes, if the new Administration tricks the American people into allowing a so-called “humanitarian intervention” in Syria. We could very quickly get involved in a full-blown regional war—with the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Israel, Gulf states, and Syrian, Iraqi, and Yemeni Sunnis on one side, and Russia, Iran, Syria, Iraqi Shi’as, Hezbollah, and Houthis on the other side. The region is a powder keg, with entangled alliances much like Europe on the eve of World War I. It wouldn’t take much for that nightmare to escalate into a nuclear confrontation. Russia is clearly mobilizing for a possible conflict, and signaling its warnings through state media and civil defense exercises, but we haven’t been told by our leaders how risky the situation has become.

10/ A lot more is at stake in Syria in 2017 than in Iraq in 2003.

The Iraq War never had the potential of escalating into a full-blown war with Russia and Iran, or triggering a nuclear confrontation. And since both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump uncritically accept Benjamin Netanyahu’s view of Iran as the main enemy in the Middle East, Israel and the Gulf States will be unleashed next year to restart military brinkmanship with Iran, which could also bring us to the gates of hell.

It is possible to stand against Assad and Putin, and still oppose wars waged by Clinton or Trump that will inflame the Middle East. Whoever wins on November 8th, the names of the losing candidates will quickly fade. *Our* “number one priority” the next day should be to stop the new president from taking us down the path of a new major war.