



## White Helmets—US Hybrid Warfare For Regime Change Operations?

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**October 2016**

### Abstract

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US appears to be weaponizing human rights as a tool to legitimize its illegal regime change operations abroad. Repeating the pattern of invoking the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine as a fig leaf to legitimize the violent overthrow of the Libyan government, Washington has created a Syrian civil defense organization—White Helmets—to document alleged Syrian army war crimes in rebel-controlled areas in order to pave way for a full-scale military invasion of Syria.

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### About the Author of this Issue

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## Analysis

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US appears to be weaponizing human rights as a tool to legitimize its illegal regime change operations abroad.

In Libya it invoked Responsibility to Protect (R2P) as a rationale to overthrow the sovereign government under Gaddafi, and destroyed a country that enjoyed the highest living standard on the African continent prior to US/NATO invasion in 2011.<sup>1</sup> Now this OPEC member is a cauldron of Wahhabi-Salafi terrorism and a weapons bazaar for ISIS, Al Qaeda, and various international Islamic extremist groups.

Ironically, it was Qaddafi loyalists that rescued US embassy personnel, and reportedly US-backed jihadists that murdered US Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans in a tragic illustration of “blowback.”<sup>2</sup> Back then, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arranged for Qatar to ship arms to members of Libyan Islamic Fronting Group (LIFG) that had pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda, in violation of US anti-terrorism law (18 U.S. Code 2339A & 2339B).<sup>3</sup>

Qatar, the only other Wahhabi state along with Saudi Arabia, is a significant donor of the Clinton Foundation and has donated anywhere from \$1 to \$5 million, while Saudi Arabia has donated between \$10 to \$25 million.<sup>4</sup> Recently, Wikileaks emails revealed that Clinton was aware Qatar and Saudi Arabia were providing funding and logistical support to ISIS and other extremist groups in the region, yet looked the other way and continued to back their agenda with massive arms packages to include weapons they could proliferate to their jihadi proxies.<sup>5</sup>

Now, it seems the Clinton campaign and Washington establishment are again conducting hybrid warfare and invoking human rights rationale to overthrow the Syrian government, based on reporting from the White Helmets—a Syrian Civil Defense organization created by the US and UK in 2013.

### Documenting “human rights abuses” to legitimize military invasion

There has been great controversy surrounding the White Helmets. In 2016 it was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize as brave men and women of Syria Civil Defense who rescue people to save lives during a war. However, there has also been disturbing reports that White Helmets is a US/UK propaganda tool to weaponize human rights for regime change in Syria as in Libya.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Garikai Chengu, “Libya: From Africa’s Wealthiest Democracy Under Gaddafi to Terrorist Haven After US Intervention”, *Counter Punch*, 20 October 2015; Christina Lin, “US Weaponization of human rights is eroding international norms”, *Asia Times*, 30 June 2016; Chase Madar, “Samantha Power and the Weaponization of Human Rights”, *Counter punch*, 6 June 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Alex Pfeiffer, “Gaddafi Loyalists—Not The Libyan Government Or U.S. Aligned Rebels—Rescued Americans In Benghazi”, *The Daily Caller*, 28 June 2016; Edwin Mora, “Exclusive—Benghazi Witness: U.S. Provided Arms to Jihadists Who Killed Americans in 9/11 Attack” *Breitbart*, 27 August 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Flynn, “Gen. Mike Flynn: Why Hillary’s record on Libya is even worse than you think”, *Fox News*, 6 October 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Nicholas and Rebecca Ballhaus, “Clinton Foundation Defends Acceptance of Foreign Donations”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 February 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Cockburn, “We finally know what Hillary Clinton knew all along—US allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar are funding ISIS”, *The Independent*, David Sirota and Andrew Perez, “Clinton Foundation Donors Got Weapons from Hillary Clinton’s State Department”, *International Business Times*, 26 May 2016; Clay Dillow, “US Sold \$33 Billion in Weapons to Gulf Countries in the Last Year”, *Fortune*, 28 March 2016; “Why the US is About to Sell Billions in Boeing Fighter Jets to Qatar”, *Fortune*, 20 April 2016; Yara Bayoumy, “Obama administration arms sales offers to Saudi top \$115 billion: report”, *Reuters*, 7 September 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Jonahan Gornall, “Newmaker: The White Helmets”, *The National*, 29 September 2016, <http://www.thenational.ae/arts-life/newmaker-the-white-helmets>



There exist some uncomfortable truths. Despite stating it is independent and not supported by any government, White Helmets is funded through US State Department's USAID to the tune of US\$23 million, and US\$29 million from the UK government. Various disturbing videos and photos have also emerged of White Helmet members carrying weapons, celebrating with Al Qaeda when they defeat the Syrian army in battles, and standing by to watch as rebel jihadists conduct executions and then immediately rushing forward to place the body in body bags.<sup>7</sup>

Its credibility took a hit when in April the leader, Raed Saleh, had his visa to the US revoked for suspected ties to terrorists.<sup>8</sup> Reports that the real Syrian Civil Defense, registered and in existence for 63 years since 1953, had never heard of the White Helmets until recently further damaged their legitimacy as a Syrian humanitarian NGO.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, the real Syria Civil Defense is a founding member of the ICDO (International Civil Defense Organization), and other ICDO partners include the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Secretarian of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG), World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations of Geneva (UNOG), Red Cross and the Red Crescent. It has an actual number to call inside Syria—113.

By contrast, the US/UK created White Helmet is not a member of ICDO, nor is there a listed public phone number to call. They are only present in Al Nusra and armed opposition territory in Idlib and East Aleppo, and the sole source that is filming and documenting alleged war crimes in Aleppo that is being fed to western media.

Their co-mingling with Al Qaeda and photos of numerous members as armed jihadists has cast doubt to their credibility as an impartial humanitarian NGO. According to a former director of the US Congressional Task Force for Counter terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, he confirmed the White Helmets is "largely a ploy for instigating Libya-style western 'humanitarian intervention' (R2Pin short). They are a propaganda entity rather than a civil defense...[and] provide the Western media what they want in order to push their line."

And that line is regime change in Syria.

### **No Fly Zones—rebel jihadists' asymmetric warfare against Syrian air force**

With increasing footage of alleged human rights abuses in Aleppo supplied by the White Helmets, there has been corresponding shifts in Washington for a no-fly zone and war against Russia and Syria—ostensibly to protect civilians. However, in truth the no fly zone serves as a form of asymmetric warfare waged by terrorists against an air force.

Asymmetric warfare is when a weaker force attempts to defeat a stronger foe, and terrorist groups are increasingly resorting to weaponizing humanitarian law—or lawfare-- as an effective counter-measure against a superior military force.

<sup>7</sup> Vanessa Beeley, "Who are Syria's White Helmets (terrorist linked)?" *21<sup>st</sup> Century Wire*, 21 June 2016,

<http://21stcenturywire.com/2016/06/21/who-are-the-syria-white-helmets/>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aAaReVn2l4>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=792ODrhwKkk>; Somini Sengupta and Anne Barnard, "Leader of Syria Rescue Group, Arriving in US for Award, is refused Entry", *New York Times*, 20 April 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel McAdams, "Why Everything You Hear About Aleppo is Wrong", *Ron Paul Liberty Report*, 29 September 2016,

<http://www.ronpaulinstitute.org/archives/featured-articles/2016/september/29/why-everything-you-hear-about-aleppo-is-wrong/>; "The Real Syrian Civil Defence Exposes White Helmets' as Terrorist- Linked Imposters", *21<sup>st</sup> Century Wire*, 23 September 2016, <http://21stcenturywire.com/2016/09/23/exclusive-the-real-syria-civil-defence-expose-natos-white-helmets-as-terrorist-linked-imposters/>; <http://21stcenturywire.com/2016/10/08/syria-message-from-the-real-syria-civil-defence-about-the-white-helmet-frauds/>



General Charles Dunlap, former deputy Judge Advocate General for the US Air Force, describes lawfare as the newest feature of 21st century combat, a form of hybrid warfare. He noted how hyper-legalism regarding collateral damage, applied to NATO's air campaign in the Balkan war, prompted NATO's lawyers to effectively become its "tactical commanders."

Terrorists understand this Achilles heel, and as General Dunlap observed, they are more than ready to exploit humanitarian values to defeat their targets.

For example, Taliban and al Qaeda's greatest vulnerability is precision air strikes. In 2008 the *Washington Times* reported a Taliban fighter lamenting, "tanks and armor are not a big deal. The fighters are the killers. I can handle everything but the jet fighters." As such they attempt to demonize the air weapon through manipulation of civilian casualties that NATO airstrikes can produce—hiding heavy weaponry in mosques and NGO compounds such as CARE International in hopes of deterring attacks or producing collateral damage media events.

Given this, what should be the international normative consensus on counter-terror tactics? If an NGO area is surreptitiously employed to hide military equipment, and the NGO fails to report this, do they become culpable as aiders and abettors of deceitful conduct which itself is a war crime? Moreover, if civilians volunteer as human shields, do they forfeit their non-combatant immunity?

How US utilizes the White Helmets to weaponize international humanitarian/human rights law will have grievous international legal repercussions for how US itself conducts counter-terrorism elsewhere, as well as for Germany, the EU, China, Russia, India and others.

In practice, the no fly zone in Libya became a form of asymmetric warfare waged by the al Qaeda linked terrorists against Libyan air superiority, by using US/NATO military forces to ground the Libyan air force. This in effect protected the terrorists, paved the way for destruction of Libya as a state, and opened the Pandora's box of refugee crisis and terrorism in EU that helped prompt Brexit, a repeat of this pattern in Syria would further strengthen Al Qaeda, ISIS and amplify destabilization of the EU.

Given the increasing number of Asian terrorists mingled with Al Nusra, Ahrar al Sham, Jaish al Islam and other jihadi groups in the Army of Conquest, this would also destabilize Asia.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the recent terrorist attack on the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan was conducted by Syria-based Chinese Uyghur jihadists and financed by Al Nusra. According to a former CIA officer, they also tracked al Qaeda operatives from Pakistan in South Asia to Syria, who then embedded in the group, so the links between Al Qaeda and Ahrar al Sham are clear—especially since "Ahrar al Sham has had within its senior command structure a number of former al-Qaida members."<sup>11</sup>

### Increasing "Saudization" of US mideast policy

Nonetheless, despite Germany calling Ahrar al Sham a "terrorist organization" and former Italian prime minister Franco Frattini voicing concerns that a no fly zone would protect al-Nusra, US continues to support the al-Qaeda groups as legitimate "opposition".<sup>12</sup> This prompted Frattini to accuse Americans of pandering to a Wahhabi

<sup>10</sup> Christina Lin, "Asian rebels in Aleppo—western blind spot", *ISPSW/ETH Zurich*, February 2016, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/publications/publication.html/196033>; <http://www.atimes.com/article/asian-rebels-in-aleppo-western-blind-spot/>

<sup>11</sup> Jack Murphy, "Meet America's think-tank fellows who support jihad", *Sofrep*, 6 October 2016, <https://sofrep.com/65217/meet-americas-think-tank-fellows-who-support-jihad/>

<sup>12</sup> Dan Alexe, "Germany convicts 4, calls US-backed Syrian group Ahrar al-Sham a "terrorist organization", *New Europe*, 7 October 2016; No-fly zone in Aleppo would protect al-Nusra—former Italian FM to RT", RT, 10 October 2016.



agenda of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, echoing other observers that US is conducting a “saudization” of its Mideast policy that has nothing to do with US national security interests.

Award-winning investigative reporter Gareth Porter for one chastised America for kowtowing to Wahhabi states and allowing US policy to be determined by the ambitions of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and an increasingly Salafist Turkey.<sup>13</sup>

He noted former Hillary Clinton aide and Pentagon official Derek Chollet, in his new book *The Long Game*, revealed that Clinton and CIA director Leon Panetta were pushing to arm Syrian opposition force solely to give US “leverage” with its Sunni allies by acquiring “skin in the game”, not that it was some well-thought out plan to resolve the Syrian crisis. Even worse, former US ambassador Robert Ford observed in February 2015 that “For a long time the administration ‘looked the other way’ while the US supported jihadists that were coordinating with Al Qaeda.”

As such this made the US complicit in the Wahhabi project of using Salafi terrorists to maximize pressure for overthrowing the Syrian government, although Syria had never attacked the US, and supporting Al Qaeda groups actually directly harms US national security.

Conservative commentator and former presidential candidate Pat Buchanan likewise rebuked the US for kowtowing to the cynical agenda of its Mideast allies, and allowing them to drag US military power into their narrow and sectarian strife that has nothing to do with US national interest.<sup>14</sup> He questioned the continued utility of these alliances that seem to cost more than they benefit Americans, a view that is gaining traction in the Congress with the recent passing of Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA) to punish Riyadh over the 9/11 attacks.

However, whether this hybrid/asymmetric warfare of weaponizing human rights would turn into a full-scale war would likely be decided in the November elections—with a President Trump seeking to work with Russia and other international partners to combat the shared civilizational threat of global Salafi-terrorism, or a President Clinton to escalate into a potential nuclear war with Russia in order to continue overthrowing secular governments throughout the Middle East.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

<sup>13</sup> Gareth Porter, “Obama’s Syria Policy: The Illusions of US Power in the Middle East”, *The Globalist*, 10 October 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Buchanan, “Will Mideast allies drag us into war?” *WND*, 4 January 2016.