

War: Crime?

Once again the US violated the most profound international law of war: initiating a war of aggression against a nation that posed no threat, imminent or otherwise, to the US or its allies.

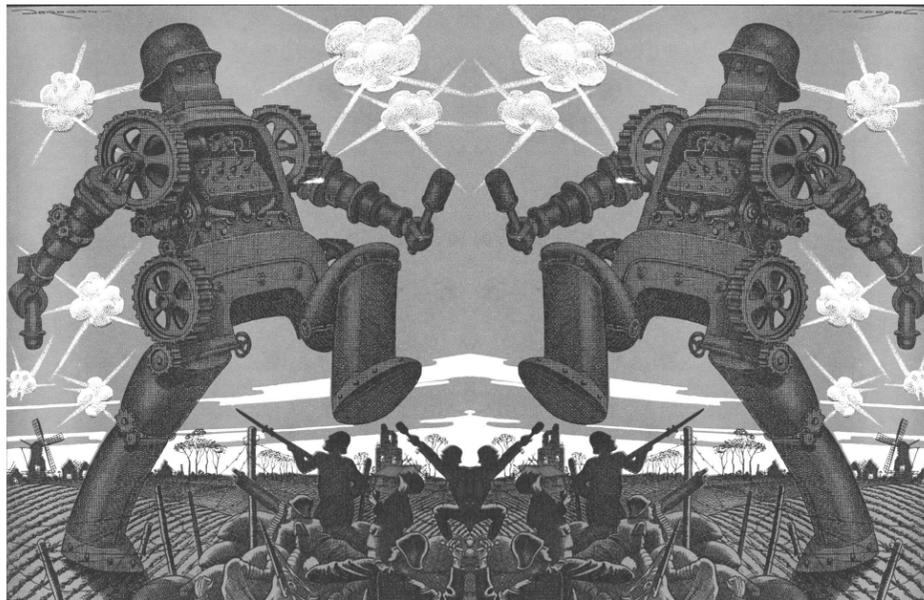
Called a **"Crime against Peace,"** this violation (whose perpetrators, under the precedent set in the Nuremberg Trials that followed World War II, can face capital punishment), is considered worse than any other war crime because, as US Nuremberg prosecutor Robert Jackson explained in his argument at the Nuremberg Trials of Nazi war criminals, a war of aggression is **"not only an international crime; it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole."**

President Trump, during his televised White House announcement just after the launching of his bombing attack on Syria, said, **"The purpose of our actions tonight is to establish a strong deterrent against the production, spread and use of chemical weapons... We are prepared to sustain this response until the Syrian regime stops its use of prohibited chemical agents."**

He was making the argument that the US, acting on its own authority without any sanction from the UN Security Council as required under international law, somehow had a duty to, on its own, punish Syria for its alleged violation of a Geneva Convention against the use of chemical weapons.

Putting aside for a moment the important question of whether the Syrian government actually did use chemical weapons in the Douma suburb of Damascus, which is in fact highly suspect, even if that country's leader, Bashar al Assad, did order the use of a banned chemical weapon, Assad's crime would be far less serious than the crime Trump and the US perpetrated under international law.

Fortunately, it appears as if saner members of the largely crazy Trump administration — notably Secretary of Defense James Mattis, a retired four-star Marine general — prevailed over the neoconservative warmongering chicken hawk John Bolton, recently ensconced in the ever-changing National Security Advisor spot, with the result that the much ballyhooed US cruise missile attack on Syria's purported "chemical arms infrastructure" was limited to three sites.



More importantly, earlier talk of hitting "command-and-control" centers like government buildings in Damascus, or Syrian air bases — places where Russia had warned that it had its own military personnel and that could have provoked a Russia military response — was pushed aside and such targets were left off the hit list. That meant the risk, about which Mattis pointedly warned in recent days, of this US attack morphing uncontrollably into a war between the two nuclear superpowers operating in Syria, the US and Russia, was minimized.

Fortunately too, for the Syrian people in target areas of the US cruise missiles and the handful of missiles launched by America's two willing "allies," Britain and France (whose participation was meant to give a sheen of "multilateralism" to the crime), at least some reports including from Russia claim that up to two-thirds of the US missiles launched were knocked down or blown up in the air by Syrian anti-missile defenses.

So we aren't facing the threat of a nuclear exchange, or a tense period in which US and Russian soldiers and airmen face each other with tense fingers on triggers in the midst of the Syrian conflict. For now.

The question is what happens next.

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The 'Pipelineistan' conspiracy: The War in Syria Has Never Been About Gas

Six years into a conflict that has killed at least 400,000 people, there was a widely held belief that the bloodshed in Syria is simply another war over Middle Eastern energy resources.

The bloodshed, so the theory goes, is a proxy battle about two proposed pipelines which would run across the country and on to Turkey and Europe.

While neither pipeline has left the drawing board, or indeed was ever realistic, this has not dampened the theory's popularity as a core reason for the Syria conflict.

The first pipeline is allegedly backed by the US and runs from Qatar through Saudi Arabia and Jordan to Syria. The second is a supposedly Russia-backed pipeline that goes from Iran, via Iraq, to Syria.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, it is claimed, rejected the Qatari pipeline in 2009, at the request of Moscow, to ensure that European reliance on Russian gas would not be undermined.

As a result, some commentators claim, the US and its European and Gulf allies, including Qatar, decided to orchestrate a rebellion against Assad to ensure that their pipe dreams became a reality rather than the Iranian option. Russia, in turn, backed Syria to ensure its own energy interests prevailed. Iran is also an ally of the current regime in Damascus.

These claims have been promoted in several quarters: the Qatari-based Al Jazeera first floated the concept of a **"Pipelineistan war"** in 2012.

The idea was floated again after the US bombing of Syria in April. This, it was claimed, was further "proof" of Washington's desire to oust Assad and enable Europe to diversify its gas dependency away from Russia.

While the US has been covertly working with Gulf allies against the Assad regime, controlling Syria's

energy resources and pipeline networks was not a primary concern. If so, it would be a very low priority for regime change.

Why? Firstly, the timeline is wrong. Covert action against Syria started under the George W Bush administration, in 2005, well before the alleged Qatari offer to Damascus in 2009.

"We can see US action against the Syrian regime well before the notion of this pipeline came into existence," says Justin Dargin, an energy scholar at Oxford University.

Secondly, the pipeline hypotheses do not stand up to the realities of how energy is transported through the Middle East and the obstacles faced by pipeline proposals, many of which fail to come to fruition. Even the Arab Gas Pipeline, whose second phase came online in 2005, has been mired in problems.

The Pipelineistan theory also ignores how the conflict started and the early months of the revolution.

In 2009, Syria announced a policy that attracted minimal attention beyond its borders at the time. Called the "Four Seas Strategy," it aimed to turn the country into a transit hub for gas between the Gulf, the Black Sea, the Caucus and the Mediterranean by expanding the 6,300 kilometres of gas and oil pipelines that criss-cross the country and by making use of the Euro-Arab Mashreq Gas Pipeline (AGP).

The AGP is not a core feature in the Pipelineistan narrative, but it does indicate the problems faced when it comes down to laying down pipelines in the region.

On the drawing board for nearly 20 years, construction of the AGP started in 2003. It was slated to cost \$1.2 billion and run 1,200 km from Egypt to Jordan and Syria, before reaching Turkey.

There, it would connect with the planned Nabucco pipeline, which would export gas to Europe.

One key element of the AGP plan was that Egypt would pump gas to Syria and Jordan. Syria would use the Egyptian gas and then top up the pipeline with gas from its own northern fields before it was sent north.

When war broke out in Syria in 2011, the last leg of the AGP - the stretch from Aleppo to Kilis in Turkey - was being constructed, never to be completed. But there were problems with the pipeline, which cost \$1.5 million per kilometre, even before the conflict erupted.

Jim Deacons is a Scottish energy consultant who worked on the AGP in Syria, including designing the final phase of the project.

"When I left [Damascus in 2010] there wasn't enough gas being fed up through Jordan," he says. "The Egyptians were gas trapped. They didn't have enough gas to export, despite signing contracts left, right and centre, so they couldn't meet their obligations."

Egypt's gas production dropped from 220 million cubic feet (mcf) per day in 2010 to 80 mcf in 2011. The AGP was shut down in 2012 after terrorist attacks on the pipeline in Sinai and Egypt's increasing need for gas for home consumption, and has not resumed operations.

Without enough gas, the AGP became a white elephant. *"Effectively, that whole project was about exporting gas from Egypt to Europe,"* says Deacons, *"but in reality there was never going to be enough for it to be reasonably worthwhile."*

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