

Democracy Now's "Alt Media" Platform for Humanitarian Imperialism in Syria

by

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on

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The "war and peace report", as progressive as it may often sound, has long ceased to be a purely listener-supported project, and this lack of economic independence has spilled into its politics.

The dust had barely settled after last weekend's U.S.-led bombing of Syria before a split in the political class developed. While some Beltway figures, media personalities and former officials [hailed](#) the bombings, [others](#) decried the "limited" nature of the airstrikes. At the grassroots level, a somewhat different debate gripped the left and the right - those who opposed the bombings were accused of buying into the propaganda of the Syria-Russia-Iran alliance, while would-be defenders of human rights called for increased military measures to degrade the killing capacity of the "Assad regime."

Democracy Now!, the daily hour-long news show hosted by Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez, has long been the flagship institution for U.S. progressives. With its jaunty 90s opening [theme](#), timely coverage of world events, liberal (maybe *radical*-liberal) take on global affairs, and impressive range of top-tier guests including authors, government officials, policy experts and activists, the syndicated program is seen as an exemplary display of independent journalism.



No doubt, the New York-based show is in a class of its own when compared to the vapidness and sensationalism of shock-jock right-wing radio or smug, Beltway liberalism of Randi Rhodes, Thom Hartmann or Cenk Uygur. Like a gust of oxygen in the choking smog of AC360-Maddow infotainment, Amy Goodman resembles an enlightened aunt at a Fourth of July party - a female version of Ira Glass who brings a kale, cauliflower, almond cheese and cumin-spiced casserole to the potluck while discussing difficult topics in an unshakeably calm, Zen-like manner.

Despite its reputation as a standard-bearer for left-of-center "alternative media," Democracy Now isn't immune to the pressures of U.S. politics: sometimes the Battle of Seattle veterans canvas their suburbs for Barack Obama; sometimes [Michael Moore](#) or [Noam Chomsky](#) get out the vote for Hillary.

In a similar manner, Democracy Now frequently accommodates narratives that would seem at home on CNN or the state-run Voice of America. With alarming regularity, the "war and peace report" has showcased passionate voices advocating Pentagon or State Department solutions to dire human-rights crises across the globe, including "regime change."

Case-in-point: Syria. Since the country plunged into the depths of withering all-sided conflict and proxy war pitting the government of Bashar al-Assad against a range of opposition groups - from Gulf Arab-funded jihadists to Western-funded secular armies, with few independent players in between - the program regularly features interviews with activists who feel that Washington can play a progressive role for the people of the region through the deployment of the U.S. Armed Forces, covert aid to factions on the ground, and the routine violation of international legal norms such as the United Nations Charter.

Democracy Now generally isn't a Pentagon mouthpiece; a large portion of its coverage does consist of decent progressive journalism. Yet interspersed throughout programming covering genuine [popular movements](#), we find narratives covering the left flank of U.S. imperialism, normalizing the use of U.S. military force for ostensibly "humanitarian" purposes.

Interventionist voices for peace

In the course of the last week - since Syria came under cruise missile attack by the trilateral U.S.-U.K.-France alliance - Democracy Now has featured two interviews with activists who unabashedly call for the Pentagon to use military measures against the Syrian government for the sake of easing the Syrian people's pain. Their arguments resemble the line of Sen. Robert Menendez (D-NJ), who [questioned](#) whether the bombings were the result of a White House "choreographed Kabuki show" with their Russian counterparts rather than the Cuban Missile Crisis-style [showdown which seemed apparent](#) prior to the strikes.

On [Tuesday](#), Goodman interviewed Ramah Kudaimi of the Syrian Solidarity Collective. Described as a "grassroots activist" and member of the anti-war movement, Kudaimi argued - as she [has](#) for several years now - that the bombings didn't manage to go far enough in displacing "the regime." Noting that the U.S., since Obama, has offered verbal support to the "Syrian people's revolution" while acting in a manner that "strengthened the regime," Kudaimi accused the Trump administration of continuing to not go far enough in ensuring regime change. Meanwhile, she accused the antiwar left of offering uncritical support to the Bush-style "War on Terror" being waged by what she depicts as the virtually united forces of Syria, Iran, Russia, and the U.S.-led coalition of Western powers and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces.

Watch: Syrian-American Activist: Limited U.S. Airstrikes Send Signal to Assad He Can Continue Mass Killing

[Syrian-American Activist: Limited U.S. Airstrikes Send Signal to Assad He Can Continue Mass Killing](#)

Mocking the very real possibility of the tripartite alliance clashing with the Russian military mission

backing Syria's government, Kudaimi said:

... it was kind of infuriating to see this being presented as breaking news, this being presented as an apocalypse, that we're about to embark on World War III, especially as has been made clear again and again by the U.S. actions is - and words - is that this was something very limited, just to kind of send a message to Bashar al-Assad that you can go on and kill people with barrel bombs, with anything, but don't - limit your use of chemical weapons.

This was followed by an interview on [Thursday](#) with Moazzam Begg, a British Pakistani survivor of illegal detention and torture at the U.S. prisons in Bagram airbase in Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay, who now heads the human-rights group [CAGE](#). In his interview, Begg stressed the need for a No-Fly Zone over the last remaining rebel stronghold of Idlib to prevent an "unprecedented massacre".

Maintaining that he is "completely against Western intervention" on account of his own first-hand experience, Begg complained that the U.S.-led intervention in the country continues to target the Syrian opposition rather than the government, dourly noting that the U.S. hasn't limited itself to fighting ISIS alone but also those groups that fought alongside it or alongside other groups like Jabhat al-Nusra, the rebranded al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. Instead, he implied, the U.S. should attack the root of the conflict: the Syrian air force. Begg said:

At least we know that in the Kurdish regions, for example, during the Iraq War, there were no-fly zones. Indeed, in Bosnia ... it was bad enough, but a no-fly zone at least stopped those who had air forces to carry out even further killing with mass casualties.

Neither guest mentioned the [significant proportion](#) of "regime supporters" who reside in Syria, or the need for a resumption of [negotiations](#) between beleaguered opposition forces, the government and the various powers who are militarily involved in the conflict.

These are far from the first occasions that Democracy Now's guests, like the New York City-based Democratic socialists of [jacobin](#) magazine, have propagated a line favoring humanitarian intervention in Syria. Past interviewees and headline readouts enthusiastically supported the NATO-backed uprising in Libya against the government of Muammar Gaddafi as well, regularly citing the [inflated figures](#) of government-caused deaths published by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

Black Agenda Report head editor Bruce Dixon [noted](#) at the time:

Something is really wrong with this picture. We have to wonder ...at least as far as the war in Libya goes, whether Democracy Now is simply feeding us the line of corporate media, the Pentagon and the State Department rather than fulfilling the role of unembedded, independent journalists."

Humanitarian crises and the pro-imperialist illusions "of idiots"

A denunciation of war crimes and indiscriminate bombings by the Syrian Arab Army or Russian Aerospace Forces - be it through hypersonic missile, artillery shell, barrel bomb, chemical warfare, etc. - is hardly our point of dispute. Nor is earnest solidarity with any people suffering at the hands of a state that disregards or does damage to their life-or-death interests.

Yet the position that any resistance to a reassertion of U.S. or European hegemony in Syria is a product of "fake news" indoctrination or a "pro-fascist anti-imperialism of idiots" - as Leila Al Shami argued in a widely-shared [blog post](#) - woefully misses the mark and cynically equates principled opponents of [imperialist war](#) with reactionary misanthropes on the far right.

To assert that Washington, London or Paris can act as guarantors of human rights or allies of the Syrian people is not only criminally naive, it provides ammunition to ideological fusillades aiming far higher than the low-hanging fruit of the Ba'athist regime alone.



For Washington and its European allies, as well as its junior partners in the region, Damascus is simply a pit-stop on the road to Tehran (and possibly Moscow) - a means by which so-called "[Iranian imperialism](#)" and the aims of rival powers can be thwarted, allowing hegemonic powers led by the U.S. to continue a policy of global conquest stretching from the Caribbean through the Mediterranean to the Sea of China.

The assertion that the war-stricken Assad regime is uniquely fascist - unlike the region's dynastic/sectarian, Zionist, militarist, or neo-Ottoman regimes - illustrates a selective indignation which dangerously feeds illusions that unlawful wars waged by top-tier Western powers to effect regime change will improve the lives of the most oppressed groups in the region and meet their need for a just peace. In what country, on what planet, do such precedents exist?

Let's provide a reminder of these actors' regional deeds in the past century: two world wars, Sykes-Picot, the partition plan, the War on Terror, police-state fascism, Wahhabist despotism, the shredding of the Middle East's social fabric, and so forth. Doesn't this offer at least a bit of proof that imperialism, neocolonialism, the military-industrial complex and the finance oligarchy at its helm aren't in the least bit concerned about advancing human rights, democracy, peace and social justice in the region?

Endless warfare - endless disorientation?

Throughout the late 20th century but especially since the end of the Cold War, the United States arrogated to itself the right of aggressive military intervention across the globe on various pretenses. From Yugoslavia to Afghanistan, across Africa and the Middle East - Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Yemen - the U.S. cited a combination of national security concerns like terrorism and human-rights crimes to justify a total disregard for international law and consensus, not to mention the subsequent war crimes its military carried out in the course of "humanitarian" warfare.

While the U.K.'s successive governments have eagerly played the "poodle" role in support of Washington's military adventures, the British people still maintain a vibrant anti-war movement. Anti-war and even anti-imperialist voices are frequently heard in the media, while Jeremy Corbyn's left-wing faction of the Labour Party has waged a stiff opposition to Tory Prime Minister Theresa May's eagerness to participate in attacks on Syria. As a result, only 28 percent of the British public [supported](#) May's "commitment to combat" Syria while 36 percent opposed it, according to a poll by *The Independent*.

In the United States, [Pew Research Center](#) data from last year showed that over twice that ratio of Americans - 58 percent - supported such missile strikes.

The U.S. anti-war movement stagnated prior to the dusk of the George W. Bush administration and the onset of 2008's election season, due in no small part to inroads by the Democratic Party and sectarian infighting by dominant leftist groups. In anticipation of the election of Barack Obama, the movement and its peace parades simply ground to a halt.

Following the jubilation of Obama's electoral success and his post-inauguration resumption of Bush-era policies in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine-Israel, and Guantanamo, the grassroots opposition never reactivated. Mocking the movement's co-option by the Democratic Party, activist Cindy Sheehan [noted](#) at the time that she began referring to the "anti-war left" as the "'anti-Republican War' movement".

In a study of the movement's failure titled "[Partisan Dynamics of Contention](#)," University of Michigan researcher Michael Heaney wrote:

As president, Obama maintained the occupation of Iraq and escalated the war in Afghanistan. The anti-war movement should have been furious at Obama's "betrayal" and reinvigorated its protest activity. Instead, attendance at anti-war rallies declined precipitously and financial resources available to the movement dissipated ... the election of Obama appeared to be a demobilizing force on the anti-war movement, even in the face of his pro-war decisions.



This grim state of affairs - ideological confusion, misplaced hopes, demoralization, disintegration - gives us ample cause to criticize the humanitarian window-of a center-left that's now been housebroken, domesticated and rendered oblivious to the main enemy at home: U.S. imperialism.

Who pays the piper calls the tune

The rise and fall of popular left-wing currents - anti-war movements, militant workers' struggles, and Black, Native American, Puerto Rican and Latin American immigrant liberation struggles - has followed predictable trends: there is the violent counter-insurgency conducted by a reinvigorated repressive state apparatus, white nationalist vigilantes, and other far-right groupings; and then there's the low-intensity counterinsurgency conducted through the ideological state apparatus of media and academia; the formation of new electoral alliances and installation of minority "faces in the right places" of power; as well as the key factor, which is the co-option of movement figures by non-profit foundations backed by major capitalist philanthropic figures.

While open repression - the iron fist - tends to radicalize movements and galvanize popular support for them, the persuasive approach of the "velvet glove" forms a much more effective, less explosive and more demilitarized way of neutralizing mass opposition - transforming the revolutionary into the reformist, the radical into the tame, and the left to the centrist.

A 1999 rally at University of California at Berkeley over keeping local control of KPFA, owned by the Pacifica Foundation.
(AP/Paul Sakuma)

Much has been made of the role of figures like Hungarian-born billionaire George Soros and his Open Society Foundations, whose proclaimed [mission](#) is to protect dissent and "build vibrant and tolerant democracies" through philanthropic grants that ostensibly serve oppressed or marginalized communities. Much of the critique can veer toward the conspiratorial, or exaggerates his role as some all-powerful impresario of the global left. Yet Soros *is* a major activist financier both [abroad](#) and at [home](#), one of many players invested in what's been called the ["Non-Profit Industrial Complex" or NPIC](#), which comprises a complex web of relations between local and federal governments, the capitalist class, philanthropic foundations, NGO/non-profit social-service and social-justice organizations.

A look at who sponsors Democracy Now! shows just how dependent it is on NPIC. It's worth quoting last year's [analysis of DN's funding structure by Danny Haiphong](#) at length:

Democracy Now runs interference for imperialism because it is beholden to funding sources, as are all non-profits and non-governmental organizations ... An analysis conducted in [Critical Sociology](#) found that the Pacifica Foundation received upwards of 148,000 USD between the years of 1996-1998 from the Ford, Carnegie, and other foundations to launch Democracy Now.

The Lannan Foundation gave Democracy Now an additional 375,000 USD packaged in a number of grants, according to the [foundation's IRS 990 forms since 2008](#). Patrick Lannan, the capitalist mogul who founded the organization, sat on the board of [ITT corporation in the late 70s and early 80s](#). The ITT corporation was instrumental in the CIA-backed fascist coup that overthrew the democratically elected socialist Salvador Allende in 1973.

... Foundations wield a form of "soft power" on behalf of U.S. imperialism. Their main purpose is to provide a "civil society" infrastructure in targeted nations capable of fomenting conditions of regime change.

"Fake news" and critical consumption



The compromised nature of Democracy Now doesn't render it entirely useless for genuine anti-imperialists and listeners opposed to war, be they "humanitarian" or not. Strong critical voices are often heard on Democracy Now – as may be the case on CBS, NBC, BBC, Al Jazeera, RT, *MintPress News*, PressTV, even maybe once in a blue moon on Fox News or CNBC.

When looking at any of these organizations we need to remain critical of the banalities they may spew such as a liberal-versus-conservative paradigm that upholds systems of power like [global monopoly capitalism \(imperialism\)](#), despite distracting debates over the finer points of how the system is upheld – is it for a more "humanitarian" world order, a more "secure" one?

All of us have a duty – as media producers and media consumers – to look beyond the rhetoric of social justice deployed by center-left establishment figures, and instead see the structures and principles they both depend on and uphold. "Fake News" in terms of bias, propaganda and lie by omission is unavoidable, but the key question remains "cui bono?" – who benefits from the propagation of this narrative?

In the case of Democracy Now!, we have incorporated non-profit 501(c)3s and big Wall Street money underwriting the ostensibly "independent" and alternative media. As usual, we should remain on guard.

The "war and peace report," as progressive as it may often sound, has long ceased to be a purely listener-supported project, and this lack of economic independence has spilled into its politics. The clearest sign of that is an implicit support, especially in the Arab Spring era, of imperialist wars on "authoritarian" regimes who find themselves in the crosshairs of the U.S. government.