

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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OTHER VIEWS

The White Helmets and brutalized Syria

Until chemical weapons are used, we tend to forget how much daily destruction and death afflict millions of Syrian civilians as President Bashar al-Assad pursues, with Russian military help, his intense bombing campaigns against remaining rebel areas. The White Helmets are a civil defense team who are heroes in that beleaguered country as they respond to as many as 35 attacks a day. Via hand-held and helmet cameras, they also expose the atrocities, including the report recently of dozens apparently killed in a chemical attack near Damascus.

When I think of the White Helmets of Syria, I see them in my mind's eye digging in the rubble of bombed out buildings, attempting to find and rescue people still alive in that rubble — trapped, injured, bleeding, suffocating. Worse, videos from the White Helmets are showing victims from the chemical attacks in agony with foaming mouths.

Assad and his family have ruled Syria for years by striking fear into the population. Before the civil war began eight years ago, their primary tool was the all-powerful secret police. Now the tools are bombs. The most damaging bombs are the barrel bombs tossed out of helicopters or war planes and filled with nails and metal, explosives and sometimes chemicals such as chlorine or sarin. It's not military positions of the rebels or of ISIS they go after. But rather they deliberately target civilians, homes, hospitals, markets, bakeries, shops and, of course, the White Helmets. It's a tactic whose aim is to force the



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population to capitulate.

The White Helmets are composed of 3,000 Syrian volunteers who chose to stay in Syria and to save others. They were ordinary people from every walk of life — tailors, blacksmiths, teachers, carpenters, university students, doctors and blue collar workers. They got their start in 2011 with the popular uprising against Assad when towns were seized by rebel groups and the government began the bombing attacks.

From those multiple teams grew a unified national organization called Syrian National Defense or White Helmets, formed in 2014. It is nonsectarian, neutral and unarmed. Their motto is "To save a life is to save all of humanity."

Support and training quickly came from abroad, first from the Mayday Rescue Foundation established by former British Army officer James Le Mesurier. Funding help followed from multiple countries, including the U.S., Canada, New Zealand and Japan. Training is done in southern Turkey.

White Helmets have rescued at least 60,000 people from danger areas. They have lost some 200 volunteers to the aerial bombardments and assassinations. Naturally, they are very unpopular with the Assad regime and Russia. Russian state media has launched a worldwide propaganda campaign to discredit the White Helmets as "terrorists" or just actors "staging rescues." True to propaganda form, the Russian Foreign Ministry called this week's report of a chemical attack a "hoax" designed to protect "terrorists."



Syrian Civil Defense White Helmets via AP, File

This April 8 file image released by the Syrian Civil Defense White Helmets, shows victims of an alleged chemical weapons attack collapsed on the floor of a building in the rebel-held town of Douma, near Damascus, Syria.

On a happier note, the White Helmets have received very positive treatment. They were nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 2016. And in 2017, documentaries about them won prizes at the U.S. Academy Awards and at the Sundance Film Festival.

As to the war in Syrian areas where White Helmets still can operate, there was a discouraging press report in late March about Idlib near the Turkish border. It is Syria's largest remaining rebel-held area and may prove to be the place where the revolution against Assad ends. It contains a motley mix of displaced civilians, defeated rebels, hard-line jihadists and those who accept a surrender deal the Assad government is offering to fleeing civilians from rebel areas of eastern Damascus. It has been sending tens of thousands of those Syrians on a one-way bus trip to Idlib.

What a choice for them: Since hard line jihadists have the upper hand there, residents are caught between government attacks from the sky and the overbearing role of jihadists

on the ground. Assad's military, with the usual help from Russia, is expected soon to make a final effort to crush Idlib.

Can Assad be made to pay a "big price" after his latest use of chemical weapons, as currently threatened by the U.S. and Western allies? We would fervently hope so. But it has never proved easy to inflict lasting damage on Assad. The Syrian air base hit by President Trump's cruise missile attack last spring was rebuilt in just a few days.

Assad might be temporarily stopped, but most analysts believe he has both the resolve and help from Russia and Iran to return to his brutal aerial assaults against civilians. In retrospect, I wish that the U.S. government had established a no-fly zone back in the Obama Administration, before the Russians dared to step into the war so prominently on Assad's side.

Harriet Isom is a former U.S. ambassador who lives on the family ranch outside Pendleton.

OTHER VIEWS

Tax dollars for napping

Dear Government:
Enclosed please find my 2017 tax form, and a check for the amount I owe, just ahead of the deadline. Can't wait to see what you're going to do with my contribution, though I have some idea based on the \$1.3 trillion spending bill passed last month.

I realize I'm in the stubborn and probably stupid minority of Americans who still do their own income tax return. No doubt, I'm missing out on some dodges, and making mistakes as well. Such is the cost of duty with this citizenship thing.

Also, given that I'm not happy you're spending my money on things like protection of Scott Pruitt's afternoon nap, I like to think that self-filing gives me the right to complain more than usual.

I see you're still punishing me for working — taxing wages and business income at a much higher rate than the money I make doing nothing, like holding stocks. Plus, you're still taxing Warren Buffett at a lower rate than his secretary, despite his plea for fairness.

And please, no lectures about underpaying my quarterlies. You are a world-class deadbeat. You're running an \$800 billion deficit this fiscal year, and that will swell to more than \$1 trillion in coming years, thanks to the Republican tax cut. By 2023, it will cost more to pay the interest on your debt than all but a handful of government functions.

So I guess you're modeling yourself after President Donald Trump, who has called himself "the king of debt." Also, he's expert at con games, stiffing contractors, and running casinos into the ground. As he's shown, those skills are certainly transferable.

I'm supposed to feel better about the tax bill I'll be paying this time next year, with lower rates. But I'll take a hit under the new deduction limits on state and local taxes. And since you're getting rid of the individual mandate, my health care premiums will go up as well. Thanks, non-Obama.

All of this would be fine if I felt better about our shared enterprise, which is looking sketchier and more gangster-like by the day. If you could, please don't spend my money on the personal vendettas, institutional lies and attempts to protect the criminals associated with Trump.

It's one thing for the president's personal fixer, Michael D. Cohen, to threaten to "come at you, grab you by the neck" when not involving government service. But once you start using public money from the executive branch to bully law enforcement into backing off their investigations of thug life, then you've made



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me a co-conspirator.

I want to be proud of how my money is spent, not afraid that it can and will be used against me.

The biggest stuff — gazillions for defense, massive subsidies for agriculture conglomerates, a down payment on the vanity border wall — just seems beyond my capacity for targeted outrage.

It's the small change that rattles my civic soul. Take Pruitt, the Environmental Protection Agency dismantler in chief — please. The first-class travel on my dime, the \$42,000 to build a super secret phone booth, the attempt to drop \$70,000 on two desks — enough! But now we find out he wanted to use a siren in his bulletproof, taxpayer-financed auto fleet to get to dinner at his favorite French restaurant, Le Diplomat.

Because of Pruitt's paranoia, his security detail costs about \$3 million a year. Do you know how many trails the National Park Service could repair with that? Well, of course you do, you're The Government. And those millions don't include the door — \$2,460 to replace — that was broken down when Pruitt's bodyguards mistook an afternoon nap for a medical emergency. Which raises the question: Why are they guarding his naps?

If Pruitt truly needed dictator-level security and motorcades, he wouldn't fly coach when he's traveling on his own dime. He gouges us because Trump thinks he's doing an outstanding job not enforcing clean air and water laws.

"I hate what they do with our tax money!" That was Trump in 2016. Now he's on track to spend more of our money on leisure travel than any president, ever. In the first 13 months of his presidency, it cost us about \$40 million in flights and security for him to go to Mar-a-Lago on weekends. When he golfs at his place in Bedminster, New Jersey, it's almost a million per trip, all costs included. The Secret Service is spending \$100,000 on golf cart rentals alone.

What would make me feel a little better is if someone there in The Government would finish Trump's audit so he can release his tax return, as promised two years ago. When you audited me, I sat down with a nice lady and a calculator, and we finished up before my coffee got cold. But then, I didn't have nearly as many cryptic business expenses marked "other."

If any problems arise with my return, please contact Mark Zuckerberg, as he knows more about me than I do.

Sincerely, A Taxpayer.

Timothy Egan worked for 18 years as a writer for The New York Times, first as the Pacific Northwest correspondent, then as a national enterprise reporter.



YOUR VIEWS

McLeod-Skinner has campaign success, governance experience

On May 15 citizens of eastern and southern Oregon will vote in our primary election to select who will run for the District 2 U.S. Congress position in November. Whoever fills this position in 2019 will help determine the affordability of your medical insurance and represent your rural values in the U.S. Congress.

On the Democratic side, Jamie McLeod-Skinner stands out as a skilled and savvy campaigner, who can bring a powerful contest to bear for the current District 2 congressional seat. Jamie has campaigned before for public office, and won, and she currently has a powerful team working with her in her bid to be our next U.S. representative.

Jamie McLeod-Skinner is tireless campaigner, bringing her message again and again to the people of eastern and southern Oregon. She believes in face-to-face conversation, and would like to talk with, and represent, every person in our district.

While Jamie is experienced in local government, and effectively addresses rural issues, she never leaves people out of the political equation. She speaks strongly to rural values, farm and ranch values, and the health and wellbeing of the people who live in Oregon's congressional District 2.

Jamie McLeod-Skinner is the strong and skilled competitor required to secure

the District 2 congressional seat, and to represent us all in the U. S. legislature.

Patty Jones
Pilot Rock

Murdock deserves another term

As mayor of Hermiston, I'm pleased endorse George Murdock in his bid for a second full term as Umatilla County commissioner.

Hermiston and Umatilla County in general have benefited from his leadership and experience. He is a man of his word and delivers on his promises.

Recently, he has been the key figure in creating a win-win agreement regarding EOTEC. He worked openly and cooperatively with the city to forge a long-term solution that bodes well for our community, and that simplifies the management of EOTEC while still providing the county with a beautiful new home for the fair.

More recently, he was the county leader in helping frame an infrastructure project that will help solve our housing shortage by using funds from the Lamb-Weston expansion project to invest in infrastructure to create positive economic growth and development.

Anyone can identify problems. The real issue is finding solutions. In my mind, George Murdock has earned our vote to a second full term as commissioner.

Dave Drotzmann
Hermiston

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