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The Bitter Fruits of Taking Things for Granted

U.S.-Egyptian Relationship as Shown in Wiki-Leaked Cables

By Kathleen Christison

Editors' note: This article is based on State Department cables 7192, 7201, 7304, 7360, 7395, 7415, 7423, all from late January & February 2009, and also #6253 on Omar Suleiman. Only #6253, which talks about Israel's high opinion of Omar Suleiman, has been released and written about elsewhere. All of the other cables, which make up the meat of this article, have been hitherto undiscussed. AC/JSC.

A clutch of Wikileaks-released cables acquired by *CounterPunch* dealing with Egypt, dating from the first weeks after Barack Obama's inauguration in January 2009, shows Egypt to have an overweening ambition to be seen both in the West and in the Arab world as *the* leading Arab regional power and shows the U.S.A. to be encouraging these visions, primarily because Egypt supports and cooperates with Israel. Egypt satisfies the perceived U.S. need to maintain stability in the region for the benefit of Israel's security. It is evident from these cables that Egyptian ambition, driven as much by a desire to please the United States and, by extension, Israel as by self-interest, is so strong as to distort Egypt's view of its fellow Arab and Muslim states and their policies and actions.

The cables also presage a reality of U.S. relations with Egypt that is becoming

Inside the Lethal World of Bulk Carriers

Death Trips on the Seven Seas

By Stan Cox

Late on the night of December 22, 2001, a mammoth merchant vessel, the *Christopher*, was caught in a North Atlantic storm. Captain Deepak Gulati radioed to shore that his ship was "taking a beating" from 15-meter waves but otherwise was in good shape. On that or a later call, he said the hatch cover closest to the ship's bow had become dislodged. Soon after, contact was lost; no mayday call was ever received.

It is hard to believe that a ship the length of three football fields could have gone from fully afloat to completely submerged in as little as five minutes, but that could well have been what happened. Once the storm had moved out of the area, a helicopter search was ordered. But there remained no trace of the accident beyond an oil slick, an empty lifeboat, a raft, and one lifejacket. The search was called off on Christmas Day. The *Christopher's* twenty-seven crew members – citizens of Ukraine, the Philippines, and India – were all presumed dead.

Deepak Gulati was my brother-in-law. A resident of Mumbai, India, he had been guiding the Greek-owned, Cyprus-flagged, coal-laden bulk carrier from Puerto Bolívar, Colombia, to a steelworks in the north of England when, west of the Azores, he and his crew ran into the storm that ended their lives. When my wife Priti first received news that radio contact with her brother had been lost, I assured her, in my naivety, that the problem must have been no more serious than a breakdown of communications equipment. I insisted that modern ships don't just suddenly sink; we were living in the year 2001, not 1850.

But, as I learned more about the world in which Deepak had lived and worked,

I came to realize just how wrong I had been, not only about the fate of the *Christopher* but also about the fragility of merchant shipping in an age of uninhibited globalization. Meanwhile, bulk carriers keep sinking and seafarers keep dying.

An estimated 90 per cent of all goods moving between countries are hauled by sea. On any given day, approximately 53,000 ships are engaging in international trade, earning at least \$380 billion annually in freight rates. The container trade is the most visible sector in shipping traffic, but a much larger volume – about two out of every three ton-miles worldwide – is accounted for by just four types of bulk cargoes: oil, coal, metallic ores, and grains.

If a merchant-shipping disaster manages to make the national or international news, it most likely involves a petroleum tanker. The sometimes catastrophic environmental damage created by an oil spill draws attention in a way that the loss of a dry-bulk carrier loaded with relatively harmless wheat, coal, or iron ore – along with a couple of dozen seafarers – cannot. The *Christopher* disaster was typical, leaving almost no mark on that day's world news. Outside of the shipping trade press, there was but a single brief wire-service report of the sinking.

A spike in bulk-carrier losses during the 1990s alarmed international authorities, prompting a flurry of investigations, international conventions, treaty revisions, and tightened in-port inspections, all aimed at making ships safer and improving the working conditions of seafarers. Those measures were credited with bringing a decline in casualties enjoyed by global shipping for a brief period earlier in this decade.

increasingly clear as U.S. policymakers respond, or fail to respond, to events on Egypt's streets. The dilemma the U.S.A. has faced – whether to encourage the ouster of Hosni Mubarak and his oppressive rule and risk the imponderables of an uncertain succession, or to support the suppression of the pro-democracy protests and risk the spread of popular anti-American and anti-Israeli uprisings throughout the Arab world – is evident as well in these two-year-old cables. There is, nonetheless, a complacency in the cables about Mubarak and his rule that U.S. officials undoubtedly rue today. The cables show clearly that U.S. officials and, following the U.S. lead, the Egyptian ones as well, have been far more concerned to advance Israel's interests by maintaining stability, keeping the Egyptian-Israeli and the Egyptian-Gaza borders quiet, and thwarting Hamas in Gaza than they have been to promote democracy in Egypt.

The cables, which include accounts of meetings between U.S. and Egyptian officials in Cairo and in Washington, as well as what are termed “scenesters” for impending visits between high-level U.S. and Egyptian officials, always mentioned Mubarak's undemocratic rule with some concern, but they indicated no urgency and no concern that his rule

might unravel as it has today. In one cable, Ambassador Margaret Scobey observed that Mubarak barely any longer even made a pretense of advancing democratic change and seemed to be “trusting in God and the inertia of the military and civilian security services” to ensure an orderly transition. She noted that the ongoing challenge for the United States remained how to balance U.S. security interests [read, Israeli security interest in quiet borders and the suppression of Hamas] against U.S. efforts to promote democratic change.

It is clear that the United States – relying on that military and security services “inertia” that Scobey noted Mubarak counted on – repeatedly came down on the side of promoting U.S., Israeli, and

The word “moderate” was used consistently throughout the cables to characterize the state of attitudes toward Israel; Egypt and other states were designated as moderate or not according to their pro- or anti-Israeli stance.

Egyptian security interests rather than Egyptian democracy. Interestingly, the U.S.A. was encouraged in this complacency by Egypt's own human rights and civil society activists. During a visit by Senator Joseph Lieberman in February 2009, the leader of an Egyptian human rights organization told Lieberman that Egypt was not ready for “instant democracy” but should rebuild its civic institutions over a period of 15 years. Other civil society leaders in the meeting lamented Egypt's suppression of human rights, but they, too, showed no expectation of change. Scobey, who attended the meeting and signed off on the cable, offered no comment to counter the activists' lack of urgency.

Egypt's Place in the Sun, with U.S. Props

With respect to Egypt's broader role in foreign affairs, the cables referred repeatedly to its centrality in Palestinian-Israeli

negotiations, in brokering some kind of reconciliation between the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority and Hamas (a “reconciliation” always designed to undermine Hamas and put the PA and Fatah in the ascendancy), and in “moderating” attitudes toward Israel in the region. The clear objective was that, through these means, Egypt would help safeguard Israel's security and satisfy the U.S. desire to maintain the status quo and guarantee Israel a safe place in the neighborhood.

One of the earliest cables, a so-called scenester for a late January 2009 visit to Cairo by U.S. Special Envoy George Mitchell, began by describing Egypt's role in the region as defined by itself and supported by the U.S.A. Scobey wrote that resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was Egypt's primary strategic political goal. For many years, she noted, Egyptians had “functioned well” as intermediaries between the Palestinians and Israel – a role that “effectively balanced Egypt's moderate stance alongside its regional image as standard-bearer for the Palestinian cause.” It comes clear in this and other cables that the reference to Egypt's “moderate stance” meant, in fact, Egypt's “pro-Israeli stance,” and that what the ambassador was talking about was Egypt's effort to be both pro-Israeli, in order to satisfy its U.S. master and its Israeli neighbor, and pro-Palestinian, in order to satisfy its Arab neighbors. (The word “moderate” was used consistently throughout the cables to characterize the state of attitudes toward Israel; Egypt and other states were designated as moderate or not according to their pro- or anti-Israeli stance. The word was not used in any other context.)

This is an extremely awkward balancing act – a kind of square-peg-in-a-round-hole task – under any circumstances and particularly at the time these cables were written, just a week after the conclusion of Operation Cast Lead, Israel's brutal 22-day assault on Gaza. It is not evident from any of the cables, however, that either the Egyptians or their American interlocutors fully appreciated this difficulty or understood quite how unfavorably Egypt's efforts to assist Israel in suppressing Palestinians in Gaza, and particularly in helping Israel during Cast Lead, were viewed at the popular level inside Egypt and throughout the Arab and Muslim world. Although this and other Scobey cables

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took some account of “withering domestic and regional criticism” of Egypt because of its failure to stand against Israel, she appeared not to have any particularly sensitive understanding of the real implications for Egypt’s standing in the region because of its close cooperation with Israel. Her greatest concern appeared to be how Egypt’s balancing act would affect Israel: in one cable, she pointed out that “we have made clear” to the Egyptians the need to “tread very carefully on this front and not allow the message to dissolve into anti-Israeli rhetoric.”

Egypt’s response to Israel’s military assault on Gaza, presumably carefully calculated to try to please Israel and the incoming Obama administration, was not to champion the Palestinian victims of the attack, as might be expected of an Arab power, but to exert increasing pressure on Hamas, to focus its anger on Syria and Qatar for daring to compete with Egypt for regional predominance, and to direct its greatest regional effort at thwarting Iran. There is no indication that U.S. officials ever attempted to counter or temper these Egyptian policies and attitudes, or that the the U.S. officials ever understood how nakedly pro-Israeli they left Egypt.

The cables described extreme Egyptian hostility to virtually any state or party in the region that enjoyed any prominence. Egyptians made it clear that they saw Iran, for instance, as a “strategic threat” to regional order because it was attempting to exert power in the area – primarily, the Egyptians believed, by promoting Hamas and Hizbullah. (There appeared to be no mention of Iran’s nuclear ambitions at the time.) Egypt believed Syria was cooperating too closely in nefarious deeds with Iran, and it disdained Qatar as a small, upstart nation with unwarranted pretensions to regional leadership. This Egyptian animosity toward virtually every party except Israel and the United States’ Arab allies, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, crops up repeatedly in the cables. Throughout Operation Cast Lead, one cable reported, Egyptian leaders “focused their ire on Syria and Qatar, as opposed to Israel.” Not a good choice for a country seeking leadership of the Arab world.

Helping Israel

The impression is strong throughout that Egyptian animosity arose less out of real concern about regional sta-

bility than out of simple anger that its own leadership position was being challenged. Often, the hostility came across as personal, as if it was a pet gripe of Mubarak’s rather than a policy issue and as if Mubarak and Egypt were one and the same. Scobey seemed to encourage the hostility. The United States was itself so obsessed with Iran – a concern generated by Israel and passed smoothly from the Bush administration to the Obama administration – and with the proxies that Iran was alleged to be promoting throughout the area – Syria, Hizbullah, and Hamas – that the Egyptian attitude seemed to fit the U.S. mold exactly. “We assess,” Scobey wrote a day

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after Obama’s inauguration, “that the Egyptians believe their primary strategic threat is Iran, that the current theater of combat is the intra-Arab struggle for primacy, and the current battle is the intra-Palestinian dispute.” If Egypt were to lose its influence among the Arab states, she wrote worriedly, “the Arab regional consensus may tilt toward Hamas and Iran and away from support for PA President Abbas and the two-state solution.” On the other hand, she hoped, if the Egyptians could come to understand “that their role as the ‘indispensable Arab state’ is contingent on being pro-active on key regional issues, including containing Iranian influence, we will continue to have an effective partner to work with, alongside other regional states such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan.”

This is another example of policymaking by wishful thinking. Scobey seemed totally unaware of the possibility that

precisely because of Egypt’s anti-Hamas actions – for instance in cooperating with Israel during and after its Gaza assault to close off all entry and exit points from the territory and all traffic through the tunnels, which served as blockaded Gaza’s only connection with the outside world – and because of its myopic hostility toward Iran and Syria, Mubarak was undermining precisely the objectives the U.S.A. wished to achieve: enhancing Mubarak’s own popularity at home and Egypt’s influence in the Arab world, as well as advancing prospects for a two-state solution.

The cables make clear that Egypt’s intelligence chief Omar Suleiman, later appointed as Mubarak’s vice president, has long been the leading actor in Egypt’s policy toward the Palestinians and Israel. His cooperation with Israel in cutting off smuggling through Gaza’s tunnels and in monitoring Gaza’s border with Egypt, guaranteeing tight control over Gaza’s entry and exit points, made him a favorite of the Israelis, as the cables make clear. Suleiman has been the man to go to for any action dealing with Hamas: for mediating Hamas-Israeli cease-fires, for

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instance, and trying to end intra-Palestinian fighting and forge “reconciliation” between Hamas and Fatah. It has been clear for some time as well that Suleiman is the go-to person for the United States in a number of areas: he has long been known as the principal facilitator of the U.S. “rendition” program, under which terror suspects held by the United States are sent to Egypt and other Arab countries for interrogation and torture, and the Palestine Papers recently released by *al-Jazeera* have exposed the substantial U.S. involvement in Suleiman’s efforts to promote the Palestinian Authority in the intra-Palestinian conflict and undermine Hamas.

Egyptian “hatred,” as it was termed, of Hamas, which was seen as uncomfortably like Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, was described throughout the cables, and U.S. officials have openly supported Suleiman’s stated determination to undermine and probably eventually destroy Hamas. In the January 2009 scenesetting cable for Mitchell’s visit, for instance, Scobey observed that Suleiman believed Palestinian “reconciliation” was necessary before any progress could be made in Gaza. Taking this statement at face value, it might sound as though Suleiman was talking about forging a genuine resolution of the Hamas-Fatah conflict. But Scobey asserted further that neither Egypt nor anyone in the international community could work with Hamas “on security, political, or economic reconstruction issues” and that Suleiman had, therefore, “struggled” to induce Hamas to cede Gaza back to the Palestinian Authority. If inducements did not work, Suleiman was prepared to “squeeze” Hamas by limiting movement in and out of Gaza, presumably among other measures.

Not surprisingly, one cable from August 2008 describing a meeting between Israeli defense officials and Suleiman indicated that the Israelis had spotted Suleiman as the most likely designee to succeed Mubarak if the latter were to die in office and that they were “most comfortable” with this prospect. Given Suleiman’s long record of cooperation with Israel, this is no wonder. More surprising is the failure of U.S. embassy officials in either Cairo or Tel Aviv to notice how poorly Suleiman’s anti-Palestinian, pro-Israeli actions would sit with other Arabs. Scobey pointed out at one

point that Hamas had “increasingly stout backing” from Syria, Qatar and Iran, but she seemed not to understand that this “stout backing” was highly significant and that denying, ignoring, or trying to change the reality of wide Hamas popularity throughout the Arab world would not make the organization go away – and would not enhance Egypt’s popularity.

Scobey appeared out of touch at other times as well. In a February 2009 “scene-setter” for an impending meeting

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between Hillary Clinton and Egyptian Foreign Minister Aboul Gheit, the ambassador asserted that Egypt “will not take any action that could be perceived as collaboration in Israel’s siege of Gaza” – an astounding statement in light of Scobey’s frequent descriptions of Egypt’s cooperation with Israel in blocking smuggling through the Gaza tunnels and securing Israel’s border with Egypt, neither of which was a secret from the outside world. In a cable describing Mubarak’s views, Scobey maintained with a straight face that he was highly sensitive to charges that Egypt was working on behalf of Israel and that, in fact, Egyptian efforts to stop the smuggling of arms to Hamas were being undertaken to protect Egypt’s own national security – a startling rationalization. At a later point, Scobey wrote that Egyptians did not want to assume responsibility for Gaza and “must be able to point the finger of blame at Israel for the plight of the Palestinians.” Scobey apparently forgot that much of the plight of Palestinians arose because of Egypt’s participation in the Israeli-U.S. blockade of

Gaza and that Arab fingers would clearly point at Egypt as well as at Israel.

It is evident from these cables that Scobey’s and in general the United States’ myopia and misplaced concern about Iran’s influence in the Middle East and the fixation on Hamas’ Islamic “radicalism” – all policies on which the U.S.A. has followed Israel’s lead for years – have blinded policymakers to reality. Over the years the U.S. relationship with Egypt and the three-way U.S.-Israeli-Egyptian relationship, have become more or less symbiotic: Egypt adopted U.S.-Israeli strategic concerns as its own and, in a circular process, the United States and Israel, in turn, readily accepted the Egyptian perspective, probably without even realizing that Egypt was merely parroting the U.S.A. and Israel.

It is often noted that U.S. officials who deal exclusively with any country in the world can develop “localitis” – a phenomenon of tunnel vision in which it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to view a situation objectively and not through that country’s perspective or through the prism of U.S. policy toward that country. These cables demonstrate strikingly how this phenomenon has worked in Egypt for years and how seldom the U.S. seriously examines its policies or, indeed, functions as a truly independent actor.

CP

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But for at least three decades safety efforts have been fighting upstream against two powerful currents: breakneck growth in the volume of trade and ruthless cost-cutting by shipping-company owners. Those currents have led toward steadily intensifying exploitation of both seafarers and equipment.

The global economy’s biggest boom years pushed the system to its limits. By early 2008, the International Union of Marine Insurance was reporting that

ships and crews were “being driven harder than anyone can remember.” Partly as a result, reported the classification society Det Norske Veritas, “a ship is twice as likely to be involved in a serious grounding, collision, or contact accident today compared with only five years ago.” Panamanian-flagged ships had been sinking at the rate of one per month over the previous year, with a total of 65 lives lost.

Then, thousands of ships were suddenly idled when the global economic crisis struck in late 2008; however, economic pressures, if anything, intensified. Cost-cutting meant continued reductions in crew sizes and turnaround times in port, with rushed loading and maintenance and widespread seafarer exhaustion as inevitable results. By mid-2009, the number of ships detained by Asian port authorities for safety or labor violations had begun rising, after years of decline.

Cargo ships continue to go down with grim frequency. Late last year, three bulk carriers – the *Hong Wei*, the *Nasco Diamond*, and the *Jian Fu Star* – sank off the southeastern coast of Asia, all within about a month. All three flew the Panamanian flag and all were carrying nickel ore from Indonesian mines to China for use in steelmaking. A total of 44 crewmembers, all Chinese, lost their lives.

At all three sites, by the time helicopters moved in to pick up survivors and some of the bodies, the ships had vanished; only oil slicks remained. That was grim enough, but rescue crews can at times be greeted by more graphic scenes of horror. In late 2009, the *Danny F II*, a 660-foot-long livestock hauler – which, in its 34-year lifetime, had flown the flags of Sweden, Singapore, Liberia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and, finally, Panama – sank in a Mediterranean storm. Having loaded 10,000 live sheep and 18,000 live cattle in Uruguay, the decrepit former vehicle carrier had been headed for Syria. More than 40 members of its crew of 80 perished; rescue attempts were severely hampered by the difficulty of spotting human survivors among tens of thousands of thrashing animals and floating carcasses.

A rudderless industry?

Over the past few decades, one feature of international shipping that has set it apart from most land-based industries is the fuzzy geographical identity of the

workplace. Owners have increasingly exercised their freedom to choose, ship by ship, the nation in which each vessel is legally owned, the nation (the so-called “flag state”) in which it is registered, and the mix of nationalities hired to crew it.

In selecting a specific combination of corporate identity, registration, and crew – often spanning several countries – a ship’s owner is, in effect, deciding on the level of regulation and taxation to which the ship will be subjected. For many own-

For at least three decades, safety efforts have been fighting upstream against two powerful currents: breakneck growth in the volume of trade and ruthless cost-cutting by shipping-company owners. Those currents have led toward steadily intensifying exploitation of both seafarers and equipment.

ers and operators, of course, the goal is to hold down expenditures on ships, equipment and safety, and to hire crews that will accept low wages.

The *Christopher*’s meandering 18-year life story followed the standard script in late 20th-century shipping. The 140,000-ton Capesize bulk carrier – the largest class of dry-cargo vessel – was built in 1983 for Belcan, a Belgian subsidiary of a Canadian company called Fednav. It was christened the *Federal Skeena*, registered under the flag of Belgium, and launched from the Dutch port of Hoboken. Over the next 18 years, the ship had its name changed twice. It was sold three times – to French, Panamanian, and Greek companies – and its Belgian national flag was replaced by the flags of Luxembourg, then Panama, and finally Cyprus.

More than half of the world’s seaborne goods trade is now done under the flags of so-called open registries, like those of Panama and Cyprus. Although they vary in quality, open registries generally have at least some characteristics of a “flag of

convenience” – a label that critics typically slap onto a registry if it does some or all of the following: permits registration of ships by noncitizens; offers fast, easy, cheap registration and minimal to nonexistent taxes; plays an important role of the economy of its (usually) small host nation; and allows the ships it registers to employ seafarers from almost any nation.

Long-established open registries like those of Panama, Cyprus, and Liberia have gained respectability in recent years; meanwhile, more threadbare flags of convenience have been offered elsewhere, in out-of-the-way places like Cambodia, Belize, Honduras, the Marshall Islands (the flag state for BP’s ill-fated Deepwater Horizon oil rig), and even landlocked Bolivia and Mongolia. Such registries can serve as a refuge for ships rejected by more reputable registries. But ships flying more traditional flags also continue to sink.

The *Christopher*, like many bulk carriers and other ships, was owned by a so-called one-ship corporation. Through such a device, individuals or companies that actually own ships can not only limit their liability for accidents, losses of cargo, and fatalities to the value of the affected ship, but can also operate even more deeply in the economic shadows.

But the most prominent up-and-coming player in world shipping – and one that doesn’t fit the pattern of ever-shifting flags, multinational crews, and ghost corporations – is China. The Chinese-owned merchant fleet is now the world’s fourth biggest, and its ship registry the ninth biggest. A Hong Kong labor leader put it to me this way: “China essentially operates its own flag-of-convenience ships manned by its own nationals. And it will soon be the biggest owning and ship-management country and have the greatest shipbuilding capacity.”

The decade from 1996 to 2005 saw 420 cargo-vessel sinkings, groundings, collisions, and other wrecks that caused fatalities. For ships flagged outside the European Union, United States, Canada and Japan, the death rate from shipwreck was almost seven times as high as the rate for ships registered with the big economic powers. Almost half of the 2,500 shipwreck deaths during that decade occurred on ships flying the flags of ten nations: Cambodia, Taiwan, Cyprus, South Korea, Syria, St. Vincent and the

Grenadines, Belize, India, Indonesia, and Panama. Death rates on ships registered in those nations were seven to twenty-three times as high as the rates of ships flagged in the wealthy nations.

How bulk carriers sink

The terrible convergence of forces that sank the *Christopher* will never be fully sorted out. The ship had been detained twice by port authorities for safety violations. The second detention was for five days in Ningbo, China, in the spring of 2001, after inspectors cited “severe structural problems” that included, according to the trade publication *TradeWinds*, “corrosion and cracked deck girders and deck beams in the area of three cargo holds.”

Examination by remote-controlled underwater cameras could have answered many of the questions surrounding the wreck. Experts estimated that an underwater search and investigation would cost \$1.8 million. Despite strong confidence that an investigation, in the words of *Tradewinds*, “could finally determine whether a structural weakness in the vessel contributed to its sinking,” the necessary funds could not be raised.

The failure of Cyprus to investigate came as no surprise. Open registries are not eager to investigate the actions of their client companies and, thereby, risk driving away future business. The last bulk-carrier loss on the open seas to be subjected to thorough investigation was that of the UK-owned *Derbyshire*, which sank way back in 1980 in the North Pacific. Its entire crew of 44, all British citizens, perished. It took 14 years of pressure from the British public before a remote-camera search and investigation were finally done.

When today’s rootless ships sink, taking faceless crews to the bottom with them, there is no chance of full investigations. Nevertheless, we do know something about how losses occur. A survey of 125 bulk carriers that preceded the *Christopher* to the ocean floor between 1963 and 1996 found that 76 probably flooded – thirty-two of those from hull cracks mostly affecting the foremost section, another four because of hatch-cover failure, the rest from unidentified causes. Nine other vessels somehow broke completely in two. Causes of the remaining 40 losses are total mysteries.

Based on the *Derbyshire* investigation

and other studies, it appears that structures of aging bulk carriers can suddenly snap apart when corroded frames and bulkheads give way under heavy loads and sometimes harsh sea conditions. Steel inevitably weakens in the constantly damp, salty air of the maritime environment, more so when it’s in contact with corrosive bulk cargoes. (Other factors can add to the risk. The *Christopher*, while still known as the *Federal Skeena*, had been “jumboized” with the insertion of an 80-foot-long midship section that increased its deadweight to 165,000 tons; when it sank, some speculated that the expansion had weakened its structure.)

In bulk-carrier sinkings, industry experts believe that the most common scenario goes like this: in rough seas, water crashes over the ship’s bow; at the same time, the hatch cover on the foremost cargo hold is dislodged to the

The global economy’s biggest boom years pushed the system to its limits. By early 2008, the International Union of Marine Insurance was reporting that ships and crews were “being driven harder than anyone can remember.”

point that seawater is able to pour into the hold. Ore or coal in the hold mixes with the water to form a highly dense slurry that, with the ship’s motion, sloshes with enough force to break the bulkhead between the first and second holds. Should that happen, according to the International Maritime Organization, “progressive flooding could rapidly occur throughout the length of the ship and the vessel would sink in a matter of minutes.”

But bulkers can founder even if there’s no major storm or hatch-cover failure. All three of those ships that sank in Asian waters in late 2010, for example, were carrying nickel ore, which, when loaded under damp tropical conditions, can form the same kind of dangerous slurry. Unbalanced cargo loading, often the result of today’s merciless time pressures, can also get a ship into deep trouble, whatever other threats might be loom-

ing.

International ship-safety standards have existed, in the form of the Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), since soon after the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912. Over the past century, SOLAS has been repeatedly amended to keep pace with new hazards and new potential solutions. In the years since the *Christopher* went down, international regulations involving bulk carriers have been upgraded several times. Resolutions on improved hatch covers, double-skin hulls, hull coatings, stronger frames, water-ingress alarms, better cargo-loading procedures, and more frequent, thorough and consistent inspections by port authorities all have been passed. Some measures apply to new ship construction, some to existing ships; some apply only to the largest bulk carriers, others to all; some are mandatory, other are only recommendations or reminders.

The selection of which measures to mandate, which to recommend, and which to set aside was based on a procedure called “formal safety assessment,” carried out by a group of industry experts for the International Association of Classification Societies. (The report was released in 2001, ten months before the *Christopher* went down.) Given the risks of fatalities with or without a particular improvement, the cost of that improvement, and other factors, the experts projected the amount of money that would be spent per life saved. If, for a given improvement, the cost exceeded \$3 million per life saved, that improvement was generally considered too expensive.

Such cold calculations are considered necessary in order to achieve consensus in the worldwide shipping industry. But they also mean that technologies or regulations, which might well have kept the *Christopher*, the *Danny F II*, the *Hong Wei*, the *Nasco Diamond*, the *Jian Fu Star*, and so many other lost cargo ships afloat, will not be adopted. If decades of experience should have taught us anything, it’s that in the search for a way to put an end to shipping tragedies, the profit and loss columns of the global marketplace hold no answers. **CP**

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Beyond Genocide Against the Crime of Sociocide

By Larry Portis

Genocide is legitimately thought of as a kind of madness, an application of clannish or “völkish” hysteria inspired by xenophobia and nationalist ideology. Genocide first became a crime in international law in December 1946, when the General Assembly of the new United Nations Organization voted a resolution concerning it. This was thanks to the tireless efforts of Raphael Lemkin (1900-1959) – a young Polish Jew and jurist haunted by the mass killings of Armenians between 1915 and 1918.

Lemkin’s campaign to gain acceptance for the notion of genocide – a word he invented – was given fresh impetus by the Nazi “holocaust.” The slaughter of political dissidents, gypsies, handicapped people, and, especially, Jews and other ethnic “minorities” led to the passage of the United Nations “Convention on the prevention of the crime of genocide” on December 9, 1948, and then its adoption on January 12, 1951, after ratification by enough member states. The United States belatedly ratified it only in 1988, initially because of the legal apartheid in some Southern states and then because of its lethal rampages in Vietnam and elsewhere.

In spite of the universal opprobrium aroused by genocide, efforts to stop it have been futile. On the contrary, the idea of genocide has been turned against the original purpose. Accusations of genocide are now used as humanistic justifications for military intervention by imperialist powers for purposes having little to do with the safeguard of peoples or societies.

For these reasons, I am convinced that genocide now must be recognized as mainly a means of committing another, and even more fundamental, international crime – “sociocide.”

The ultimate aim of sociocide is not the physical destruction of peoples, or of a loosely defined culture, or of a state, as it is sometimes confusedly said, but rather the destruction of the relationships between the different groups con-

stituting a society. This is what governments of the United States have done in Iraq, what Western governments encouraged in ex-Yugoslavia, what the Zionists did in Palestine. If “ethnic cleansing” in all its physically and culturally destructive forms can contribute to sociocide the way is clear for colonial or imperi-

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alist domination and exploitation of a region, whether it be for expropriation of the land, exploitation of its economic resources, or occupation of its strategic location.

The deliberate destruction of societies began in the 16th century as a way of ensuring European colonial domination in the Americas and elsewhere. Although the ideology of racism justified the practice, extermination of peoples was only incidental to it.

As late as 1885, at the Berlin Conference convened for the purpose, the sub-Saharan African continent was subjected to the same treatment. Boundaries were arbitrarily drawn between different territorial spheres of Western influence so as to create antagonisms between different indigenous cultural and language groups among Africans, facilitating European control.

The breaking-up of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires followed the same principle, but it was expressed as a progressive process of “national self-determination.” The various peace treaties following the World War

I – the Treaties of Versailles, Le Trianon, Saint-Germain-en-Laye and Neuilly – did just this. Borders were redrawn so as to create a number of small states, all of which would be weakened by internal divisions, as different “nationalities” fought each other as they defended and promoted their individual “identities.” “National self-determination,” instead of overcoming nationalist passions, contributed to them by unleashing the desire to territorially aggrandize a “national homeland” and to exclude alien “minorities.” Continuing to live together in harmony in the same geographical region was no longer considered rational or realistic behavior.

The same ploy was used in the Middle East, first to incite the “Arabs” to fight with the British against the Turks, and then to carve up the region into several artificial states over which Britain, France, and, eventually, the United States had domination. The imperialist allies accomplished all this with perfect cynicism, if little realism. Although a few duplicitous agents, such as T.E. Lawrence (“of Arabia”), may have had moral qualms about misleading the Arabs, others had no such compunctions.

All of which leads us to the creation of the state of Israel and the institutionalization of “ethnic cleansing.” Ilan Pappé’s book, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (2006), removed any lingering doubts that the destruction of Palestinian society was the paramount objective of Zionist planners. For them, the greatest problem was the mutual accommodation still existing between Jews and Palestinians (including, of course, Jewish Palestinians and even some Zionists). David Ben Gurion and his collaborators meticulously planned the expulsion of upwards of a million people, but they could not announce the plan to local Jewish officials in the cities or in kibbutzim who wished to live in peace and harmony with all established residents. The “Judaization” of Palestine – the creation of the state of Israel – required the destruction of Palestinian society.

The irony of the situation is that, since the creation of the Israeli state, objections to its nature raise the cry of “the destruction of Israel,” implying that the Jews will be pushed into the sea. In fact, the destruction of Israel as an institutionalized juridical entity is the only possible way of achieving social harmony in the

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region of historical Palestine. The right of habitation must exist for residents, but not extended to specific groups so as to reinforce the exclusion of other groups, as the Zionist movement and then the state of Israel have done. Only by, on the one hand, ending the infamous Israeli "Law of Return" – allowing everyone considered a Jew to obtain Israeli citizenship – and, on the other hand, the creation of non-confessional political institutions can lead to the re-emergence of a truly cohesive society in the area.

The destruction of economic and civil infrastructures in Iraq is also a clear example of sociocide. The controversy over the estimation of deaths in Iraq caused by the U.S.-led war and occupation – in studies made by the Bloomberg School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University concluding that by 2006 there had been close to one million deaths – is really about how to characterize the nature of the war. With such high figures, the war can be considered genocidal.

However, once again, the ultimate objective has not been to kill Iraqis. The strategy has been to destroy civilian and economic infrastructures. The old "divide

and rule" methods are simply preceded by those of "shock and awe." Control over the region requires the intentional creation or exacerbation of inter-societal tensions so as to shatter social and cultural bonds or affinities. This is a sociocidal policy.

Toward a definition of sociocide

We must go beyond the idea of genocide as formulated by Rafael Lemkin, and struggle against the crime of sociocide.

Lemkin's difficult but successful campaign to define and then gain acceptance for the idea of genocide was a major accomplishment. However, it is clear that his work emerged out of a period when nationalism was so strong that even the notion of genocide tended to reinforce nationalistic tendencies.

For example, even the genocide of the Armenians has tended to focus on one large group and to obscure the fate of other victims of the Turkish state. In addition to the one and a half million Armenian victims, there were also 400,000 Assyrians killed. The Kurdish population has also suffered in this regard. The objective of the Turkish gov-

ernment was to eliminate whoever was considered potentially subversive, regardless of their specific characteristics.

The massive population transfers of the 20th and 21st centuries – generally facilitated, condoned or ignored by Western governments – are collaterally genocidal but mainly sociocidal.

The word "sociocide" exists, as a brief consultation of the Internet attests. But it is not adequately defined.

I suggest that Article 2 of the U.N. genocide convention can be adapted toward this end. It defines genocide as acts "committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such." It then goes on to delineate the ways this destruction is done.

An effective definition of sociocide might, then, be the following: "The destruction, in whole or in part, of the collective existence of a community of diverse social, cultural, linguistic or other affinity groups promoting mutual respect and tolerance." CP

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