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Don't Use the LGBTQIA+ Community to Justify U.S. Interventionism

Eric Fleischmann

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Last week, *The Gay Times* reported that—based on “a leaked letter sent on 20 February to Michelle Bachelet, the United Nations’ (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights”—U.S. officials claim there is an official Russian list of “journalists, activists and gay rights advocates’ to punish in the event it invades Ukraine.” Would this be in line with the Russian state’s past and ongoing behavior? Absolutely. Under Vladimir Putin, both same-sex marriage and adoption by trans people were made illegal by constitutional amendment. The government has also cracked down on free expression of the LGBTQIA+ community and its allies, with school teachers in St. Petersburg instructed to surveil student social media for LGBTQIA+ symbols, and the government passing its notorious “gay propaganda law,” which, as Miriam Elder explains, “makes it illegal to equate straight and gay relationships, as well as the distribution of material on gay rights. It introduces fines for individuals and media groups found guilty of breaking the law,

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as well as special fines for foreigners.” But violence against and repression of queer folks is perpetuated by governments across the globe everyday and the U.S. government does essentially nothing. Take, for example, the United States’ ally Saudi Arabia, where—though not strictly enforced—homosexuality is punishable by death. Or even look at the U.S. itself, where last year “officially surpassed 2015 as the worst year for anti-LGBTQ legislation in recent history, according to updated tracking and analysis by the Human Rights Campaign” and, in just the first week of 2022, 7 states proposed anti-trans bills. So what is the explanation for the difference in reaction to the Russian government’s list? It helps serve the U.S. empire in propagandizing liberals and progressives into supporting potential future intervention in Ukraine. This is an important tool for the U.S. government to deploy early on since Putin has officially invaded the Ukraine, Biden has put sanctions on Russia and moved more troops into Eastern Europe(though not Ukraine itself), and Ukraine has had their European Union application approved. As such, a conflict between the two superpowers is, regardless of Biden’s current promises, a distinct possibility.

This is almost identical to the tactic of co-opting western feminist discourse to help justify incursions into the Middle East. Jyhene Kebsi points to one “lie utilized by the Bush administration” to defend the U.S. invasion of Iraq “that did not receive the same attention” as those about WMDs “in the media: the so-called empowerment of Iraqi women.” This helped serve as a “pretext for American ‘humanitarian imperialism’ after the ‘weapons of mass destruction in Iraq’ argument was losing steam.” Kebsi gestures, for example, to then Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky deflecting criticism of the war by stating, “We are working to advance the interests of Iraqi women in every area, from human rights to political and economic participation to health care and education” as well as an entire “campaign called ‘W Stands for

to gain economic leverage. And of course a war with Russia means a massive uptick in stocks from U.S. arms manufacturers. The reasons extend on and on, but with little to none of them having anything to do with protecting the LGBTQIA+ community in Ukraine. Stop the charade. Don't use our community to justify U.S. interventionism.

Women' . . . launched to present the imperial war on Iraq as an attempt to 'save and support' Iraqi women. This campaign reinforced a logic of 'compassionate patriarchy' through which the masculinized state protected the feminized vulnerable populations." Kebsi observe how this campaign was supported by numerous "American liberal feminists" and, as such, "[s]everal white liberal American feminists misrepresented the Iraq war as a mission to 'help' Iraqi women, coupled with support towards Bush's use of feminist rhetoric to make the empowerment of Iraqi and Afghan women an issue of national security."

Explicitly utilizing this tactic in the context of Afghanistan is actually a matter of public record through a CIA analysis available through Wikileaks that outlines a PR strategy of emphasizing women's rights issues to the French and German public to ensure continued support for the International Security Assistance Force mission from those countries. The document outlines how...

Afghan women could serve as ideal messengers in humanizing the ISAF role in combating the Taliban because of women's ability to speak personally and credibly about their experiences under the Taliban, their aspirations for the future, and their fears of a Taliban victory. Outreach initiatives that create media opportunities for Afghan women to share their stories with French, German, and other European women could help to overcome pervasive skepticism among women in Western Europe toward the ISAF mission.

And a similar strategy continued into the latest section of the War on Terror, which focused on ISIS/ISIL in particular. Rania Khalek details the emphasis by US officials and mainstream media outlets on sexual violence as a primary reason for militarily opposing ISIS—despite similar violence perpetrated by "the governments of the nations the US has appointed

to spearhead its anti-ISIS coalition . . . namely, the Iraqi, Egyptian and Saudi regimes”—and how the “US corporate media outlets have acted as cheerleaders and stenographers, allowing the US government to hijack the deterioration of women’s rights as a selling point for perpetual war.” And so even as 90% of drone-strikes everywhere from Afghanistan to Pakistan to Yemen to Somalia kill non-targets, then US Ambassador-At-Large for Global Women’s Issues Catherine Russell proclaimed, “These are women and girls who pleaded to be killed in airstrikes rather than be brutalized by ISIL.”

As must be obvious, the co-option of feminism and gay rights rhetoric to encourage non-criticism of or even open support for warfare in the Middle East is nearly identical to the strategy behind this leaked info about a Russian governmental hit list of Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ activists. But further, not just as feminism but LGBTQIA+ activism as well has been used before as a means of justifying military intervention. Even as groups like Gay Liberation Network (formerly Chicago Anti-Bashing Network)—much like the feminist Code Pink—organized against the Iraq War, Mubarak Dahir felt the need to call out pro-war LGBTQIA+ folks and allies in the popular queer Chicagoan publication *Windy City Times*. He implores that “gay and lesbian people who endorse the war in and occupation of Iraq—and possible future military action against other countries like Syria—need to stop using the guise of caring about the plight of gay Arabs to rationalize their support” and that “it’s easy to see why advocates of war who are speaking to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities would invoke the freedom of GLBT peoples in trying to win over their audience. . . [b]ut we shouldn’t fall for that kind of insincere play on our emotions.” This can be broadly related to the concept of ‘homonationalism’—a term originating with Jasbir K. Puar—which describes a trend and/or strategy that involves downplaying homophobia and transphobia in ‘Western’ countries and representing them

as fundamentally pro-LGBTQIA+ (because of their supposed progressivism and egalitarianism) in comparison to the supposedly homogeneously homophobic and transphobic ‘non-West’ in order to—in the case of the U.S.—justify American Exceptionalism and continued intervention in the Middle East and, now, potentially against ‘Eastern’ Russia.

Whether or not the leak about the list itself was intentional, at the very least its purpose in being sent to the UN is to secure their approval for military action and now that it is public it will almost certainly be used to push liberals and progressives to support any potential escalation in U.S. interference in Ukraine. Which is not to say that the very real fears of the Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ community and its allies are illegitimate. The Russian state does in fact pose a significant threat to the freedom and safety of sexual and gender minorities both in Ukraine and, obviously, within Russia itself. Nor is this to say that Putin’s actions are in any way legitimated or lessened in their cruelty and violence simply because the U.S. government is utilizing propaganda. As Autonomous Action states: “We have no illusions about the Ukrainian state, but it is clear to us that it is not the main aggressor in this story—this is *not* a confrontation between two equal evils. First of all, this is an attempt by the Russian authoritarian government to solve its internal problems through a ‘small victorious war and the accumulation of lands’ [a reference to Ivan III].” We—as in the residents of the U.S., not the government—should therefore support the self-defense of the Ukrainian people and the anti-war resistance of the Russian people—particularly their grassroots efforts. But none of these reasons are why the United States is beginning to get involved. The U.S. empire is a dying one and Putin hopes to see Russia made into the dominant global superpower by extending its hand into Europe. Not only this but conflict with Russia would mean major stoppages in their oil supply chains to Europe, opening the path for the U.S. government to utilize its anti-Indigenous pipeline infrastructure