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Founder and Publisher  
YOUSUF S. AL-ALYAN

Editor-in-Chief  
ABD AL-RAHMAN AL-ALYAN

EDITORIAL : 24833199-24833358-24833432  
ADVERTISING : 24835616/7  
FAX : 24835620/1  
CIRCULATION : 24833199 Extn. 163  
ACCOUNTS : 24835619  
COMMERCIAL : 24835618

P.O. Box 1301 Safat, 13014 Kuwait.  
E MAIL: info@kuwaittimes.net  
Website: www.kuwaittimes.net

## Issues

BLACK VOTE KEY  
FOR CLINTON IN  
BATTLEFIELDS

By Michael Mathes

Under a canvas tent, African-American businessman and chef Santi Jones was offering barbecue tacos to tailgaters outside a Carolina football game when he ruminated on Hillary Clinton and whether black voters will win her the White House. The former secretary of state needs a strong turnout among minorities, particularly African Americans, if she is to defeat Republican Donald Trump and succeed the nation's first black president.

Can she rally them to the ballot box on Nov 8 where it counts, in battlegrounds like North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Florida? "She can," Jones, 37, said as hip-hop pumped from nearby speakers on a recent Sunday in Charlotte, North Carolina. "But she's got to try a little harder."

Racial tensions, fuelled by a series of police shootings of black men, have simmered in the United States since last year. Some have accused real estate billionaire Trump of fomenting the discord through his provocative campaign rhetoric, his years of propagating the "birther" conspiracy theory that Obama was not born in the United States, and embrace of the Republican by white nationalists. And when he was asked about what was necessary to heal the racial divide during his first debate with Clinton, in the aftermath of deadly unrest that rocked Charlotte, Trump answered by lamenting that "we need law and order in our country."

North Carolina is seen as ground zero for Clinton's efforts to convert tangible and historically high black support for President Barack Obama into her own victory in swing states that will decide the election. Obama narrowly won North Carolina in 2008, then lost it four years later. Clinton's campaign is now in overdrive to turn the Tar Heel state blue again.

## 'Sticking Together'

Blacks comprise 12 percent of the US electorate, and about nine in 10 support Clinton, according to polls. Yet many black voters remain lukewarm about her. In a sign of the challenge Clinton faces, even Jones, who supports Clinton, said he is not sure whether he'll vote. At a Clinton campaign field office in a Charlotte strip mall, volunteers like Arnetta Strickland, 56, were making calls to rally Democrats and undecided voters.

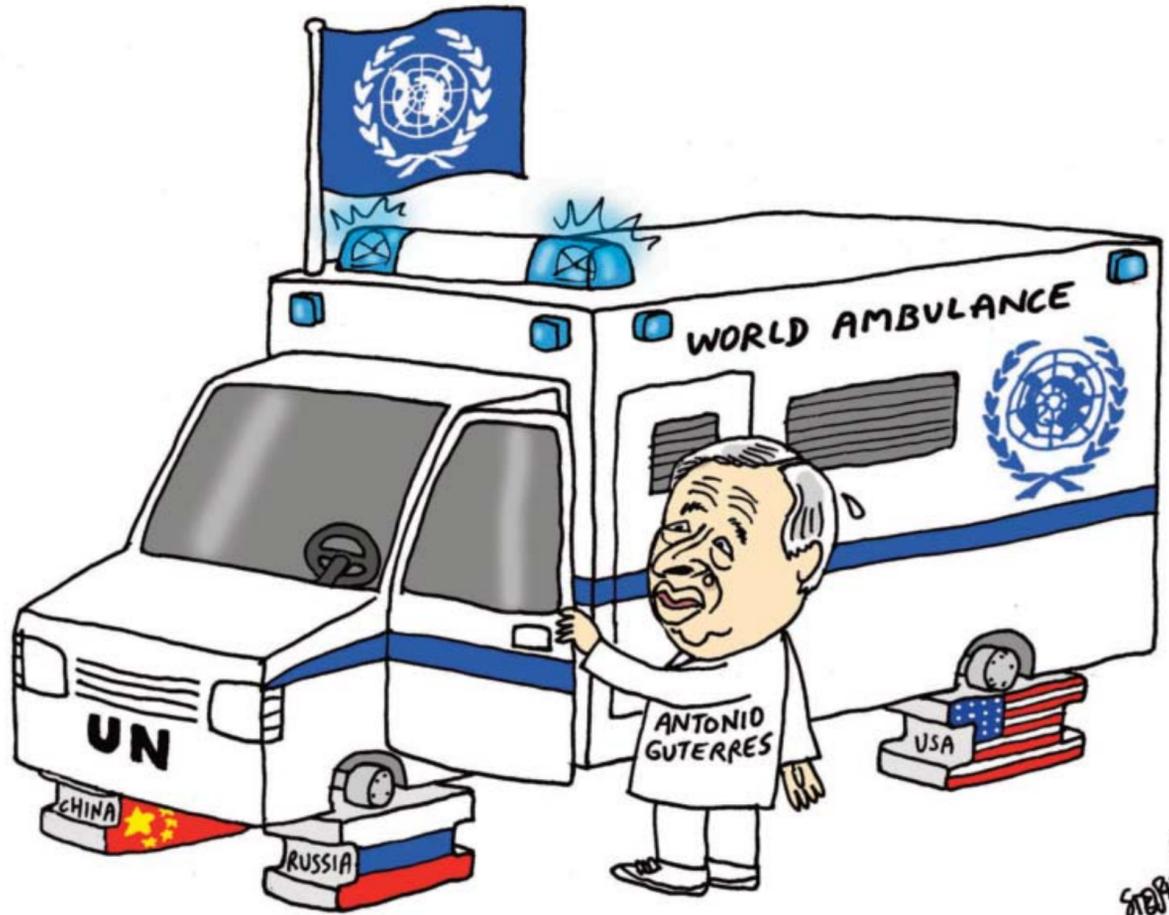
Strickland, a medical biller, shook her head when asked if Trump could do or say anything to make her or fellow African-Americans reconsider their votes. "Most blacks are Democrats," she explained. "No matter what he says, they're not going to vote for him. We're used to sticking together." And yet Strickland, who volunteered for Obama, expressed skepticism about whether turnout for Clinton "will be the same as Obama's".

Last month, the president issued a stern warning to the black community. "There's no such thing as a vote that doesn't matter," Obama told a Congressional Black Caucus dinner. "After we have achieved historic turnout in 2008 and 2012, especially in the African-American community, I will consider it a personal insult, an insult to my legacy, if this community lets down its guard and fails to activate itself in this election."

Clinton holds a slim lead in North Carolina, according to polling. She may expect a bounce in coming days after a shocking video was made public Friday in which Trump was caught making very lewd and demeaning comments about groping women. At the Anderton barbershop in Charlotte, barber Brendan Watson said he and colleagues registered 2,000 new voters during the previous two elections. "I see us doing like the same thing this time," he said. "I feel a sense of urgency in the community that we will show up."

Still, he acknowledged North Carolina will be "tough" to win. The challenge comes amid a rise in nationwide racial tension fuelled in part by police killings of unarmed blacks. Several relatives of African Americans who died at the hands of police or in police custody have become known as Mothers of the Movement, and campaign for Clinton. They include Geneva Reed-Veal, mother of Sandra Bland whose death in a Texas jail sparked protests.

Reed-Veal acknowledged to AFP that the inspiration about Clinton might be different than it was with Obama, but hoped Democratic "loyalty" will convert to votes. Part of Clinton's struggle to win over black voters, Reed-Veal said, stems from a controversial crime bill that Bill Clinton signed into law. In a 1996 speech Hillary said it aimed to crack down on "super-predators", which many took to mean young black men. She apologized, but resentment lingered. — AFP



## WHY ARE REPUBLICANS DROPPING TRUMP NOW?

By Julie Pace

Why now? And why this? For the legion of Republicans who abandoned Donald Trump on Saturday, recoiling in horror from comments their party's White House nominee made about using his fame to prey on women, there is no escaping those questions. For months, they stomach their incendiary remarks about Mexicans, Muslims, prisoners of war, a Gold Star military family and a Hispanic judge, along with offensive statements about women too numerous to count. Democratic critics argue that their silence - or the promise to vote for Trump, but not endorse him - amounted to tacit approval of misogyny and racism.

There were no good answers Saturday, and few Republicans attempted to offer any. A steady stream of GOP officials revoked their endorsements or called for Trump to drop out of the race, condemning the New York billionaire in emailed statements and carefully crafted tweets. But some, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and House Speaker Paul Ryan, stuck with Trump even as they condemned his comments. "It is a troubling situation," Ryan said.

Those fleeing from Trump may ultimately say it was the shock of hearing and seeing the businessman's crudeness on video

that prompted them to finally walk away. On Friday, The Washington Post and NBC News both released a 2005 recording of Trump describing attempts to have sex with a married woman. His words were caught on a live microphone while talking with Billy Bush, then a host of "Access Hollywood".

Some may draw a distinction between Trump's outrageous earlier comments about women, minorities and others by noting that this time, the businessman wasn't just being offensive - he was describing actions that could be considered sexual assault. In the video, Trump is heard saying that his fame allows him to "do anything" to women. "Grab them by the p\*\*\*\*. You can do anything," he says.

## Political

But with a month until Election Day, and early voting already underway in several states, the truest answer to why Republicans are dropping Trump now - and why they're dropping him over this - is likely political. During the Republican primary, GOP officials worried that disavowing Trump would alienate his supporters and hurt the party in congressional races. In the general election, Trump's crass behavior also seemed easier for Republicans to tolerate when stacked up against Democrat Hillary Clinton, a candidate so reviled by

many in the GOP that virtually nothing Trump did seemed worse than the prospect of her becoming president.

But these new revelations come at a time when the White House race seems to be slipping away from Trump. He's been unable to attract support beyond that offered by his core backers. His performance in the first debate was undisciplined and he followed it up by tangling with a beauty queen whom he shamed two decades ago for gaining weight. "There were people who were just starting to feel like this ship was going down and now this gives people a good excuse to jump off," said Katie Packer, a Republican strategist who advised Mitt Romney's 2012 campaign and led an unsuccessful effort to prevent Trump from becoming the GOP nominee.

While some Republicans expressed astonishment and dismay over Trump's 2005 comments, those who steadfastly refused to endorse him throughout the campaign suggested their party knew full well what they were getting with the brash real estate mogul and reality TV star. "Nothing that has happened in the last 48 hours is surprising to me or many others," said Ohio Gov John Kasich, who was critical of Trump when he ran against him in the primary and has remained so for months.

Privately, even Republicans who didn't

formally revoke their support for Trump conceded there was little he could do to right his campaign at this point. Early voting is already underway in some key states and the comments aired in the video will likely be unforgivable with independent women - a constituency Trump desperately needs to win if he has any hope of defeating Clinton.

The last hope now for many Republicans is that an unimaginable election year will still end with the GOP in control of the Senate. New Hampshire Sen Kelly Ayotte and Nevada Rep Joe Heck, both locked in tight races, joined the parade of officials Saturday who said they simply couldn't stand by Trump anymore.

For Ayotte, the move earned her no quarter from her Democratic opponent, New Hampshire Gov Maggie Hassan. "She has had one example after the next of Donald Trump's despicable words and his despicable behavior as reasons that she should have disavowed him," Hassan said. "It took her until now when the revelation of his comments from a decade ago were made to decide that politically she couldn't stand with him anymore." Look for more of the same in races nationwide. Democrats made clear Saturday they would spend the next month trying to ensure they and other Republicans get no credit for walking away now. — AP

## ALEPPO'S HORROR, IN WORDS OF WHITE HELMETS

By Karam Al-Masri

As bombs rained down on Aleppo, White Helmets volunteer Abu Hassan rushed to join the search for survivors, as usual, never imagining he would find his son's body among the dead. The two of them had worked side-by-side in scores of harrowing rescue operations in rebel-held districts of Syria's battleground second city over the past three years. But Abu Hassan said that rescue mission was one he will never forget. "About two weeks ago, I heard SOS calls on the walkie-talkie about heavy casualties in Salhin," the 50-year-old former carpenter told AFP.

He said he knew his son Hassan had been heading to the eastern neighborhood to refuel a White Helmets ambulance.

"When I got there, I saw bodies lying on the floor. One of the volunteers told me there were more behind the building that was hit. That's when I started to feel afraid. I found the body of a young man lying face down, with severe wounds to his stomach, leg and head. I turned him around to see his face. It was my son."

## 'I Can't Stand Remembering'

Abu Hassan said he spent the rest of the night sitting next to his son's body on the floor of the White Helmets branch where they both worked. At dawn, he buried Hassan himself. "It was the hardest moment of my life," he said, struggling to hold back tears. I asked the branch chief to move us to a different building, because I couldn't stay in the same place and see his

name and the words he wrote on the wall. I can't stand remembering that night." The 26-year-old left behind a wife and two children of his own.

Abu Hassan pointed to a photograph of him - a sandy-haired, grinning young man - on the memorial wall of the now-disused branch headquarters in the Bab Al-Nayrab district of the city. Three other volunteers from the branch who lost their lives are commemorated alongside him. Their signature hardhats have not been reused but instead preserved as a tribute.

## Branches 'Targeted'

Across Syria, more than 140 of the White Helmets' nearly 3,000 volunteers have died in the line of duty. Their mission is to save the lives of others but sometimes

they need to be rescued themselves. Mohammed Wawi described one operation last week, when bombing began as he was searching for survivors of an earlier air strike. "The fire and rescue team was hit and six members of our branch were wounded, one of them seriously," Wawi said. "We had been trying to save people, but then the residents saved us."

Wawi was smearing mud on the branch's fire truck in an attempt to camouflage it, protecting it from the view of warplanes overhead. Since government forces launched an offensive to recapture east Aleppo last month, the rebel-held sector has been subjected to devastating air strikes. Whole streets have been levelled and the White Helmets' own infrastructure has taken a heavy hit. "Our branches have been directly targeted in air strikes," said Bab Al-Nayrab branch chief Bibars Mashaal. In the past two weeks alone, three branches have been put out of action and a third of the White Helmets' ambulances, fire trucks and bulldozers in the city destroyed, Mashaal said.

## 'They are my Family'

Often, the damage to rescue workers is more than skin-deep. Louay Mashhadi, 25, who heads another White Helmets branch in Aleppo, recalled one rescue operation earlier this month that left him so traumatised he stayed home for three days afterwards. "I pulled an infant, four or five months old, out of the rubble," said Mashhadi, whose own son is around the same age. "He had lost his legs and part of his stomach but he was still alive. There was no one around from his family, so the baby stayed in my arms for about 15 minutes. He died when the ambulance came."

Mashhadi said the volunteers relied on each other for the strength to continue their work. "Because we're on call all night together in the same centres, we're more than just colleagues or friends." But that makes it all the more painful when fellow members are killed. Four of Mashhadi's team have lost their lives in the past two months alone. "I cried for them all, because they are members of my family." — AFP



Syrian civil defense volunteers, known as White Helmets, work around destroyed buildings following reported air strikes on the rebel-held town of Douma on the eastern outskirts of the capital Damascus on Oct 5, 2016. — AFP

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