

Corporate Media Disinformation: Syriza, Democracy And The Death Of A Saudi Tyrant

By [Media Lens](#)

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

It's always a tricky moment for the corporate media when a foreign leader dies. The content and tone need to be appropriate, moulded to whether that leader fell into line with Western policies or not. Thus, when Venezuela's Hugo Chavez died in 2013, [conventional coverage](#) strongly suggested he had been a dangerous, quasi-dictatorial, loony lefty. For instance, the *Guardian's* Rory Carroll, the paper's lead reporter on Venezuela from 2006-2012, appeared to let slip his own personal view on Chavez when he [wrote](#):

'To the millions who detested him as a thug and charlatan, it will be occasion to bid, vocally or discreetly, good riddance.'

By contrast, the sociologist and independent Venezuela expert Gregory Wilpert [praised](#) Chavez's 'tremendous legacy' and 'many achievements'. These included nationalising large parts of the private oil industry to pay for new social programs to tackle inequality, much-needed land reform, and improved education and public housing.

When the genuinely dangerous, neocon ideologue and Cold War fanatic Ronald Reagan died, his [appalling legacy](#) - not least his blood-soaked support for brutal regimes in Latin America - was [burnished](#) to a high sheen, presenting the former US president as a stalwart defender of Western 'values'. For the *Guardian's* [editors](#):

'Mr Reagan made America feel good about itself again. [...] He gave American conservatism a humanity and hope that it never had in the Goldwater or Nixon eras...'

Coverage of the death of Saudi Arabian dictator King Abdullah on January 23 fits the usual pattern. Given the Saudi kingdom's longstanding role as a key US client state in the Middle East, in particular the West's dependence on the country for oil and as a market for arms sales, coverage was pitched to reflect a suitably skewed version of reality. Thus, news articles and broadcasts dutifully relayed the standard rhetoric of US Secretary of State John Kerry who [declared](#):

'This is a sad day. The United States has lost a friend ... and the world has lost a revered leader. King Abdullah was a man of wisdom and vision.'

As Keane Bhatt of the US media watchdog FAIR [pointed out](#), Kerry's distasteful words were cover for a brutal tyrant 'whose regime routinely flogs dissenters and beheads those guilty

of “sorcery”’. Amnesty [reports](#) that more than 2,000 people were executed in Saudi Arabia between 1985 and 2013:

‘It is absolutely shocking to witness the Kingdom’s authorities’ callous disregard to fundamental human rights. The use of the death penalty in Saudi Arabia is so far removed from any kind of legal parameters that it is almost hard to believe.’

Writer Anas Abbas [observed](#) that when it comes to the barbarity of crime and punishment, there is little to choose between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic State.

Human Rights Watch [notes](#) that despite modest Saudi reforms, women and ethnic minorities still suffer from an ‘enforced subservient status’ and discrimination against women remains entrenched. Human rights violations continue to take place against Saudi Arabia’s nine million domestic migrant workers.

[According to](#) Campaign Against Arms Trade, Saudi Arabia is the UK’s largest customer for weaponry, with over £5.5 billion worth of arms in the five and a half years from January 2008 to June 2012. In 2012, the New York Times [reported](#):

‘Most of the arms shipped at the behest of Saudi Arabia and Qatar to supply Syrian rebel groups fighting the government of Bashar al-Assad are going to hard-line Islamic jihadists...’

Veteran Middle East correspondent Patrick Cockburn [points to](#) Saudi Arabia’s critical role in the rise of Isis, ‘stoking an escalating Sunni-Shia conflict across the Islamic world.’ He adds:

‘15 out of 19 of the 9/11 hijackers were Saudis, as was Bin Laden and most of the private donors who funded the operation.’

Abdullah was also an [accomplice to US war crimes in the Middle East](#), not least the invasion of Iraq which ‘relied upon secret, extensive Saudi military assistance’. Moreover, a classified cable from the US embassy in Riyadh, published by WikiLeaks, [referred](#) to ‘the king’s frequent exhortations to the US to attack Iran’, with Abdullah appealing to American officials ‘to cut off the head of the snake’.

Murtaza Hussain, a journalist at [The Intercept](#), notes that:

‘in the case of almost every Arab Spring uprising, Saudi Arabia attempted to intervene forcefully in order to either shore up existing regimes or shape revolutions to conform with their own interests.’

For example:

‘In Bahrain, Saudi forces intervened to crush a popular uprising which had threatened the rule of the ruling al-Khalifa monarchy...’

President Obama turned a blind eye to all of this when he [praised](#) 'King Abdullah's vision' which was dedicated 'to greater engagement with the world.'

So how did the BBC, the global paragon of 'impartial' news, respond to King Abdullah's death?

Quick! Give That Critic Thirty Seconds! But No More!

The BBC broke the news of the Saudi king's death with a headline obituary [stating](#) that Abdullah was 'seen as a reformer & vocal advocate of peace in Middle East.' It could have been a spoof headline if the reality, outlined above, had not been so tragic.

In BBC News coverage there were token, if sometimes cryptic, references to the cruel nature of the Saudi regime. BBC security correspondent Frank Gardner [said](#) in an online 'analysis' piece:

'The government has yet to find a way to cope with mild calls for reforms, and is abusing anti-terror laws to silence reformers and punish its critics.'

On the flagship BBC News at Ten programme, editors presumably realised they'd better find *someonet*o say *something* critical about the Saudi regime. So they granted an Amnesty spokesperson a prize [slot](#)... of less than 30 seconds.

Likewise, you will search long and hard to find substantive discussion of the uncomfortable questions surrounding King Abdullah's successor, his half-brother Salman. A rare exception, an editorial in *Investor's Business Daily*, [warned](#) that 'President Obama should think before bowing to Saudi Arabia's new king' because:

'King Salman has a history of funding al-Qaida, and his son has been accused of knowing in advance about the 9/11 attacks.'

While the corporate news media continued to look away, an in-depth article in *Foreign Policy* by David Andrew Weinberg examined 'Salman's record of bolstering and embracing extremists', [noting](#) that:

'Salman was the [Saudi] regime's lead fundraiser for mujahideen, or Islamic holy warriors, in Afghanistan in the 1980s, as well as for Bosnian Muslims during the Balkan struggles of the 1990s. In essence, he served as Saudi Arabia's financial point man for bolstering fundamentalist proxies in war zones abroad.'

Weinberg continued:

'Salman also helped recruit fighters for Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, an Afghan Salafist fighter who served as a mentor to both Osama bin Laden and 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.'

But Salman's troubling record is 'now getting downplayed for political convenience', said Weinberg, and corporate journalists seem ignorant of the facts, or simply know not to go

there.

Ironically, King Abdullah died just two days after the BBC had dedicated considerable resources to 'BBC Democracy Day'. This was a celebration of the 750th anniversary of the first parliament of elected representatives at Westminster in London. The day was 'produced', the BBC proudly [declared](#), 'in collaboration with the House of Commons and the House of Lords'. In an eloquent letter, Media Lens reader Sam Gurney [pointed out](#) so much that was wrong or missing about 'BBC Democracy Day':

'Why should the British public be able to read about the "extraordinary concentration of ownership" of the media in Chile, but not in the UK? Why should the British public be able to read about "the flaws of French democracy", but not of democracy in the UK? Why should democracy indicators for the UK only be prominently featured in the BBC's output when it scores at the very top, rather than when it fails relative to comparable countries? Why should the state of democracy only really be of concern to the British public in other countries? If the BBC wishes to celebrate transparency and democracy, then it should fastidiously ensure these values are reflected in its coverage.'

King Abdullah spared BBC blushes by not dying on the very day that the UK's state broadcaster was celebrating 'transparency and democracy'. Imagine the conundrum in juggling all of that with coverage of a strongly Western-aligned tyrant. A close call indeed. As Neil Clark [said](#) on Twitter:

'No need to pen long pieces on western elite's double standards on "democracy" & "extremism". Just read their glowing tributes 2 #KingAbdullah'

[Reds Under The Bed!](#)

Further difficulties for ostensibly democracy-loving corporate media soon followed with the stunning victory of Syriza, the 'radical' party of the left, in the Greek general election. Repetition of 'radical left', and significant mentions of Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras as a 'former Communist', set the required tone. Namely, watch out - Red Scare!

Some reports were blatant in their scaremongering. The Daily Mail [declared](#):

'The new Greek government has picked its first fight with the European Union, delaying agreement on further EU sanctions against Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine.

'The move raised European and Nato fears that Moscow might seek to exploit the extremist coalition under Alexis Tsipras as a Trojan horse within the key western alliances.'

The Trojan horse theme was taken one step further in the *Sunday Times* ([February 1, 2015](#); subscription required) with a front cover story in its News Review section by [Matthew Campbell](#), proclaiming: 'Greece: Putin's Trojan Horse'. The propaganda was highlighted by a ridiculous composite [image](#) of a bare-chested Putin sitting astride a large Trojan horse being wheeled along by the smiling Tsipras.



Syriza's supposed 'ties to the Kremlin' pose an 'insidious threat to stability across the continent', asserted Campbell:

'The benefits to Russia of Syriza's victory became clear when Tsipras complained on Tuesday about a European statement blaming Moscow for an attack in eastern Ukraine that had killed 30 civilians.'

The hyped-up, Murdoch-owned *Sunday Times* 'analysis' went into overdrive:

'The EU managed to maintain a fragile unity in Brussels at an emergency meeting of foreign ministers on Thursday when Greece agreed to sanctions on a wider circle of Russians connected to Putin. But now the Kremlin's strategy seems clear: it sees in Greece a Trojan horse for attacking the EU from within.'

The supposedly 'progressive' *Guardian* was not immune to waving a warning flag about this Red Menace, [proclaiming](#) that the new Greek government were now set on a 'collision course with Europe'. The report added that 'European politics has been plunged into a volatile new era' by these 'far-left radicals'.

A week later, a *Guardian* [editorial](#) on Syriza and the Podemos party in Spain plumbed new depths. Both of these left-wing parties, claimed the editorial, 'draw their conflicting passions from a well of nationalism' and were united with the extreme right 'by a worrying xenophobia'. Moreover, Syriza and Podemos are 'intellectually dishonest' for often laying all the blame for Greece and Spain's hardships on Germany's Angela Merkel. Perhaps worse, they are guilty of 'indulgence of Vladimir Putin's propaganda over Ukraine'. Podemos, in particular, has shown 'sympathy for official Russian views', intoned the editorial ominously, without specifying what these dangerous views are.

The paper concluded with the ugly statement that 'voters will want reassurance of the insurgent parties' respect for the basic rules of liberal democracy' and that the 'intoxications of nationalism' must be defeated.

The smear campaign was now up and running. The conundrum for corporate media, including liberal newspapers, is how to present themselves as passionate defenders of

'democracy' and 'open debate', even while they work hard to deflect any serious democratic challenges to elite power. This Guardian editorial is a classic example.

So what were these 'far-left' and 'radical' threats identified by the *Guardian*? As BBC News [pointed out](#) factually, in a propaganda-free moment, the new Greek prime minister:

'has pledged to renegotiate Greece's debt arrangement with international creditors.

'He has also vowed to reverse many of the austerity measures adopted by Greece since a series of bailouts began in 2010.'

Economist Paul Krugman [injected](#) a dose of rational analysis, almost entirely missing from 'mainstream' coverage:

'European officials would be well advised to skip the lectures calling on [Tsipras] to act responsibly and to go along with their program. The fact is they have no credibility; the program they imposed on Greece never made sense. It had no chance of working.'

Krugman added:

'If anything, the problem with Syriza's plans may be that they're not radical enough. Debt relief and an easing of austerity would reduce the economic pain, but it's doubtful whether they are sufficient to produce a strong recovery...

'Still, in calling for a major change, Mr. Tsipras is being far more realistic than officials who want the beatings to continue until morale improves. The rest of Europe should give him a chance to end his country's nightmare.'

But Syriza's modest set of promises was enough to set off warning bells amongst Europe's ruling political and economic class. British Prime Minister David Cameron 'welcomed' Syriza's victory with this [nervous couplet](#) on Twitter:

'The Greek election will increase economic uncertainty across Europe. That's why the UK must stick to our plan, delivering security at home.'

The code phrase 'economic uncertainty' means, as usual, the risk of reduced profits and diminished control held by financial and political interests. And 'security at home' translates to security for huge corporations and the rich city investors in London's financial centre. BBC News [echoed](#) the concerns of this elite perspective, broadcasting that 'Syriza's victory has raised fears about Greece's future in the euro.'

This is the standard, state-corporate news narrative that stretches back many decades. Any public challenge to the dominant elite is to be regarded as a threat to the correctly established order of 'stable society', and a cause for fear. The constant, scaremongering refrain of 'radical leftists' coming to power in a European country, no less, provoked this [priceless retort](#) from writer Stephanie Gilley:

'BBC claims the idea of people not living in poverty at the mercy of the rich is RADICAL.'

BBC News revealed its true colours again when Business Editor Robert Peston declared over archive footage that clearly [showed](#) Greek police attacking protestors:

'The Greeks rioted against austerity...'

But then, the corporate media have form in declaring protests to be 'riots', as striking miners from the 1980s will attest, many of whom were brutally attacked by the police under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's orders. Similarly, the corporate media's skewed focus when covering 'anti-capitalist' protests in later years was on supposed 'riots' and isolated acts of violence (at times instigated by police *agents provocateurs*).

Finally, note that the misuse of the term 'radical' is endemic throughout the corporate media. As Noam Chomsky explains, 'radical' properly applies to powerful parties and politicians who sell themselves as 'mainstream', but whose policies deviate strongly from public opinion. Chomsky [describes](#) today's state-corporate power elites as:

'radical statist reactionaries, who believe that the US should rule the world, by force if necessary, in the interests of the narrow sectors of concentrated private power and wealth that they represent...'

The powerful state that these narrow sectors have worked hard to forge is required to:

'serve those interests, not the interests of the public, who are to be frightened into submission while the progressive legislation and achievements of popular struggle of the past century are dismantled, along with the democratic culture that sustained them.'

As ever, such a rational view of the real threats to democracy from powerful elites was missing from 'BBC Democracy Day' and its coverage by the rest of the 'mainstream' media. The fact that a brutal, Western-allied Saudi tyrant died around the same time only highlighted the corporate media's central role in propping up undemocratic systems of power, class and privilege.

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