

Media Disinformation: The Islamic State (ISIS), Syria's President Bashar Al Assad and the Bombing of Iraq

By [Media Lens](#)

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This time last year, Western corporate media were [focused](#) on a single, grave threat to human life and civilised values. An endless stream of atrocity claims – some real, some fabricated with ‘evidence’ posted on YouTube – depicted President Assad of Syria as the latest incarnation of Milosevic, Saddam Hussein, bin Laden, Gaddafi: namely, the Official Enemy to be targeted for destruction.

Once again, ‘quality’ media generated a sense of inevitability – this Enemy was *also* so monstrous that the US-UK alliance *had* to ‘intervene’, to ‘act’. It later [transpired](#) that the plan was to ‘completely eradicate any military capabilities Assad had’.

The massacre claims were part of a rolling propaganda barrage intended to clear a path through public opposition to an attack. It was a close copy of the 1991 Gulf War media campaign described by the late historian Howard Zinn:

‘The American population was bombarded the way the Iraqi population was bombarded. It was a war against us, a war of lies and disinformation and omission of history. That kind of war, overwhelming and devastating, waged here in the US while the Gulf War was waged over there.’ (Zinn, Power, History and Warfare, Open Magazine Pamphlet Series, No. 8, 1991, p.12)

This summer, the Assad atrocity stories splashed across newspaper front pages and TV broadcasts for so long have mysteriously dried up. If the BBC website looked like [this](#) last year, it now looks like [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#). The Independent published an [article](#) with a title that would have been unthinkable even a few months ago:

‘Putin may have been right about Syria all along – Many cautioned against the earlier insistence of the Obama administration that Assad must go’

Has the man universally [loathed](#) and [reviled](#) by corporate commentators undergone an appropriately Damascene conversion? A more prosaic explanation was supplied by the Financial Times:

‘US and allies must join Assad to defeat Isis [Islamic State], warns British MP’
(Sam Jones, Financial Times, August 21, 2014)

The MP in question, Sir Malcolm Rifkind – chairman of parliament’s intelligence and security committee, and a former foreign secretary – declared:

“[Isis] need to be eliminated and we should not be squeamish about how we do it... Sometimes you have to develop relationships with people who are extremely nasty in order to get rid of people who are even nastier.”

One year ago, Rifkind [called](#) for a ‘military strike’ on Syria of ‘a significant kind’:

‘If we don’t make that effort to punish and deter, then these actions will indeed continue.’

Richard Dannatt, former head of the British army, [observed](#) last month:

‘The old saying “my enemy’s enemy is my friend” has begun to have some resonance with our relationship in Iran and I think it is going to have to have some resonance with our relationship with Assad.’

Again, unthinkable in the recent past, when Media Lens was [smeared](#) as ‘pro-Assad’ for [challenging](#) obviously suspect, warmongering claims.

Fighters hailed by the media last year as heroic ‘rebels’ opposing Assad’s army are [now](#) decidedly ‘jihadists’. 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...’.

Assad, it seems, is yesterday’s ‘bad guy’ – Isis is the new ‘threat’. On this, almost every media commentator appears to agree. A Guardian leader of August 11, [commented](#):

‘President Obama had no real alternative to the air strikes he ordered last week against Islamic State (Isis) forces... Quite apart from the threat to the future of Iraq as a whole, the US and Britain have a humanitarian duty to the endangered minorities, and a debt of honour to the Kurds.’

It is pretty remarkable that journalists are still able to believe (presumably dismissing Gaza as a blip) that US-UK foreign policy is guided by notions of ‘duty’ and ‘honour’. The UK’s leading ‘liberal-left’ newspaper is apparently not appalled by the prospect that the killers of [half a million](#) children through sanctions and in excess of [one million people](#) as a result of the 2003 invasion are once again affecting to ‘help’ Iraq. Why, because the editors can perceive ‘ignorance and incompetence’ in Western actions but not self-interested criminality. Thus, for the Guardian, ‘America is right to intervene.’

The editors offered the vaguest of nods in the direction of one of the great bloodbaths of modern times:

'After all that has passed in recent years, hesitation about any kind of intervention in the Middle East is entirely understandable. But the desperate plight of the Iraqi minorities and the potentially very serious threat to the Kurds surely warrants a fundamental reconsideration.'

Alternatively, 'all that has passed in recent years' might provoke 'a fundamental reconsideration' of the idea that the US-UK alliance is guided by concern for the plight of Iraqi minorities.

As Steve Coll [wrote](#) in The New Yorker last month:

'ExxonMobil and Chevron are among the many oil and gas firms large and small drilling in Kurdistan under contracts that compensate the companies for their political risk-taking with unusually favorable terms.'

Coll added sardonically:

'It's not about oil. After you've written that on the blackboard five hundred times, watch Rachel Maddow's documentary "[Why We Did It](#)" for a highly sophisticated yet pointed journalistic take on how the world oil economy has figured from the start as a silent partner in the Iraq fiasco.'

The conclusion:

'Obama's defense of Erbil is effectively the defense of an undeclared Kurdish oil state whose sources of geopolitical appeal - as a long-term, non-Russian supplier of oil and gas to Europe, for example - are best not spoken of in polite or naïve company...'

'We Tried To Set The Middle East To Rights'

Like the rest of the corporate press, the Guardian view of the world is heavily influenced by structural factors - internal corporate needs conditioned by external political and corporate pressures. On August 15, another Guardian leader [commented](#):

'[R]arely in modern history can military force have been exerted over such an extended period to such little purpose. We tried to set the Middle East to rights, but succeeded only in deepening its divisions and intensifying the violence we had hoped to curb.'

'We' - US-UK state-corporate-military-media power - 'tried to set the Middle East to rights'. For the people, we are to presume, not Big Oil, the 'silent partner in the Iraq fiasco'. However:

'We have been burnt before, we should not be burnt again.'

The great lesson to take from our devastation of an entire country - 'we' suffered.

A further Guardian leader on August 18 [opined](#):

'The situation in Iraq is very threatening. But Britain is only one of many countries under threat.'

According to the FBI and Homeland Security, even the US is not at risk from Isis even after the recent airstrikes. Associated Press [reported](#):

'The FBI and Homeland Security Department say there are no specific or credible terror threats to the U.S. homeland from the Islamic State militant group.'

Richard Barrett, who ran counterterrorism operations for Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, [argues](#) that the latest Western war in Iraq 'does rather play to the [jihadist] narrative that these bad regimes are being supported by outside powers and, therefore, if you get too close to overthrowing them, the outside powers will come and beat you up'. The people who were 'going to fight Assad or [former Iraqi prime minister Nouri Al] Maliki are now seeing a broader enemy' in the form of the US and UK governments. Barrett adds:

'The argument that they could also achieve the same [result] by [conducting] terrorist attacks in Western countries becomes stronger [though] not necessarily inevitable... Their justification will be: "If it hadn't been for air strikes we would be fine, establishing our caliphate [in Iraq].. Why did you mess with us? Now we'll mess with you.'"

Barrett suggests that military action should always be a last resort and is not the 'tool that is going to solve the [Isis] problem. Look at Libya, look at Afghanistan, look at Iraq in 2003. It's just reaching for a hammer because it is a hammer and it's to hand'.

The potential for the imagined threat to *become* real was emphasised by the brutal murder of journalist James Foley captured on an Isis video. A Guardian leader of August 21 [observed](#):

'The video is one of a number of developments that have sharpened our understanding of the risks inherent in a new military campaign in the region, even if limited and carefully conducted - that is, as limited and carefully conducted as an undertaking aimed at blowing up things and people can ever be.'

Presumably the Guardian has inside knowledge indicating that the campaign is 'limited and carefully conducted'. But even the Guardian's own logic suggested Isis would become a threat to the West only when 'we' attack *them*:

'Bluntly put: if we target them, they will target us.'

So Isis are *not* in fact 'our' enemy until 'we' *make* them 'our' enemy! But of course it is 'our' job to sort them out:

'We should not be alone in a contest with Isis. Regional powers should take on a greater role, perhaps even military, but certainly a more coherent diplomatic role.'

At the Guardian's dissident extreme, Owen Jones [wrote](#) on August 20:

'Nobody is pretending that Isis is going to be defeated by a few rousing renditions of Kumbaya.'

So we can take for granted that the focus should be on defeating the new enemy identified by Western elites:

'Surely only then can the Iraqi military hope to defeat these sectarian murderers.'

But then should we not also aspire 'to defeat' the notoriously vicious and unaccountable Iraqi military? And Jones quoted veteran Middle East correspondent Patrick Cockburn to the effect that 'Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies are the "foster parents" of Isis'. So should we not also be focusing on the need 'to defeat' Saudi Arabia and Qatar? And how about the US and UK governments who supply the weapons and other support empowering these tyrannies?

But even dissident 'mainstream' journalists conform to propaganda demanding that Official Enemies be targeted for 'defeat'. Favoured allies, and of course the West, are treated quite differently. The public is to believe that the sheer evil of the Enemy means that negotiation, compromise and accommodation are out of the question - war is often presented as the only option. Why? Because it allows the West to play its trump card, high-tech violence; to get what it wants on its own terms. When negotiation, later is mysteriously found to be possible even with the likes of Gaddafi (2004) and Assad (2014), few ask why it was once declared out of the question.

Jones concluded:

'Because Isis has proved so successful in spreading terror, it will be difficult to have a rational debate about how to defeat them.'

Because Western governments are so successful in spreading terror, it will be difficult for journalists like Jones to have a rational debate focused on something other than defeating the enemy *du jour*.

Modern Enlightenment Culture

A leader in The Times commented:

'Modern enlightenment culture [sic] finds it hard to grasp the notion of radical evil. When theocratic fanatics destroyed the Twin Towers on 9/11 and bombed the Spanish train network in 2004 and the London Underground on 7/7, the instinct of many western commentators was to wonder what Europe and America had done to provoke such hatred. The correct answer was "nothing".'

(Leading article, 'Beating the barbarians,' The Times, August 12, 2014)

Modern enlightenment culture also finds it hard to grasp the notion that it has itself committed crimes of awesome violence.

The Times lamented the failure of 'a decade of efforts to build democracy in Iraq' - a level of wilful blindness that would have stunned the *philosophes*. Inevitably, The Times supported yet another war as the only enlightened option:

'A coherent strategy of striking jihadist targets, arming the peshmerga and supporting a new, inclusive Iraqi administration could salvage stability in Iraq. Anything less hands victory to barbarians.'

In 2005, journalist Seymour Hersh [reported](#) that between autumn 2003 and late autumn 2004, the US 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing alone had dropped '500,000 tons of ordnance [on Iraq], and that is two million, 500-pound bombs'. Perhaps these latest US bombs will do better.

The Times echoed the Guardian on Isis:

'The organisation is a threat to the peoples of the region, to the stability of the Middle East and to Britain directly.' (Leading article, 'State of Violence,' The Times, August 18, 2014)

David Aaronovitch has been playing his usual role of demoniser-in-chief, with his familiar calls for war to prevent - what else? - 'effective genocide', this time in Iraq (Gaza being someone else's problem). As usual, the Nazis are the obvious comparison:

'Isis are very like the SS in occupied eastern Europe. There is the same idea of a mystical destiny that doesn't just permit killing, but demands it... In service of that vision, the pits had to be filled with bodies.' (Aaronovitch, 'Isis will just keep killing - until we stop them,' The Times, August 11, 2014)

And:

'Just like the SS, Isis men will kill more and more... stopping only when they are utterly defeated and every executioner - even if he is such a gentle boy from Purley - is dead or tried.'

Therapists describe a phenomenon called 'projection' - the 'enemy' acts as a screen on which the analysand projects precisely the qualities he or she is unwilling to face in him or herself. Thus, since 1945, *the West* has endlessly left pits 'filled with bodies' driven by the mystical 'manifest destiny' of 'American exceptionalism'. Aaronovitch himself summed up the thinking on August 14:

'Something broke in western policy when Ed Miliband won the vote preventing action in Syria after the chemical attacks this time last year... The message was clear to everyone and is the worst you can ever send - that the cops have

left town.' (Aaronovitch, 'Only military action will defeat the jihadis,' The Times, August 14, 2014)

'We' are 'the cops'. Who voted 'us' Globocop? No-one, 'we' seized the role by right of military might. And so we find that the claim can again be exactly reversed. Are we really playing the role of 'cops'? Well, cops are not supposed to illegally invade countries, overthrow governments, flatten cities, steal resources, commit mass torture. What kind of people do that? Villains, criminals, terrorists.

To look hard in the mirror of the Official Enemy is to see the truth of who 'we' really are.

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