

Misconceptions regarding Politics and Human Rights in War-Torn Syria

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Since polling on the Syrian war began, majorities of Americans (some quite large) have consistently expressed their opposition to US military intervention in Syria.

Nevertheless, in the weeks leading up to Syria's acceptance of Russia's proposal to place its chemical weapons under international control, many policy makers and much of the mainstream media seemed to be working overtime to reverse these trends. And they did this, in part, by vilifying the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, to almost mythical proportions. It is easier to entertain the idea of dropping bombs on a country that is governed by such a demonized leader.

My objective in this paper is not to build an apology for president Assad. My intention, rather, is to present a more objective view of the Syrian crisis, so that more Americans can form a rational and just position on this conflict. I will do this by critically addressing seven popular conceptions pertaining to the Assad regime.

Popular conception 1: Assad is a dictator

The Syrian government is best described as a one-party dictatorship, marked by a certain tension between a reformist president – Bashar al-Assad – and the old elite of the Ba'ath party, which has resisted some of his political and economic reforms (The Center for Systemic Peace 2010).

Nevertheless, a new constitution was put to a referendum in 2012.[1] Among other things, it limits the presidency to two seven-year terms and allows for multiparty elections.

It would appear, then that the prospects for democracy appear much greater under the current regime than they are under the rebels. As Spencer and Sherlock (2013) note, developments in Syria have not unfolded as expected: “Western hopes of building a moderate Syrian opposition to President Bashar al-Assad have been set back after the Islamist militias that dominate the rebel movement said they were ‘going it alone’ and intended to establish a sharia state.”[2]

Further, as controversial as it might be, it is worth asking whether the lack of political rights is, as many Syrians appear to believe, an acceptable tradeoff for political stability. According to the Polity study, which is sponsored by a task force that is, in turn, supported by the U.S. government, even the regime's “most vehement detractors concede that [its] greatest accomplishment was to maintain stability in Syria's ethnically and religiously fragmented society” (The Center for Systemic Peace 2010).

Popular conception 2: Assad is an unpopular leader

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it...”- The American Declaration of Independence

Recognition of the right to resistance – a core concept in American political culture – forms the basis on which some in the West have advocated for the overthrow of Assad. They sympathize with the rebels in Syria’s ongoing civil war on the grounds that President Bashar al-Assad is a generally reviled leader. They may cite the findings of a “secret” 2011 poll conducted by Pepperdine University, which suggest that the vast majority of Syrians oppose the Assad regime (Hawken et al. 2010). Yet even the lead author of the study, Angela Hawken, expressed doubts about the sample’s representativeness:

“‘Those who agreed to answer a poll conducted without government approval may be more likely to express anti-government sentiments than their neighbors who refused,’ Hawken said, adding that it was hard to tell how representative the numbers were of overall public opinion in Syria” (Labott 2011).

A particularly suspicious finding was that no more than 5% of the population held negative views of the protestors, even though religious minorities, which comprise approximately 26% of the Syrian population (CIA 2013), are among the groups that have historically “served as the primary base of support for the Ba’ath regime” (Strickland 2013). In spite of these logistical issues, Western media outlets widely reported that “eight out of ten Syrians...say ‘Assad must go’” (Reuters 2011).

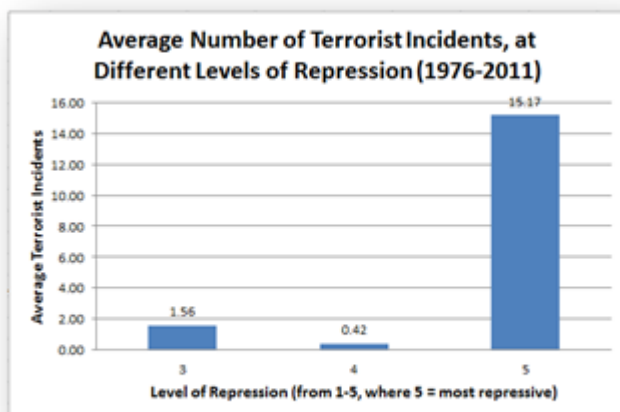
In contrast to the Pepperdine survey, there are studies claiming that a majority of Syrians approve of Assad,[3] although they, too, are methodologically questionable. In short, it is difficult to go by poll analysis. Nevertheless, the Polity study – which, given its funding, could not be argued to have a pro-Assad bias – notes that, as late as mid-March 2011, Bashar al-Assad “continued to wield a relatively high degree of popular support and legitimacy” (The Center for Systemic Peace 2010).

Popular conception 3: Assad is a flagrant violator of human rights

Syria does not have an exemplary human rights record. However, it is important to put some of this repression in historic context. From 1974-2011, there were 200 incidents classified as acts of terrorism, at least 84 of which were committed by the Muslim Brotherhood.[4] These events resulted in hundreds of deaths. In other words, Syria has been fighting its own “war on terror”.

Further, it appears that Syria’s relatively high level of repression is partially a response to its ongoing struggle with terrorism. The widely-used Political Terror Scale measures repression by numerically coding annual reports published by Amnesty International, as well

as those released by the USSD.[5] Country scores range from 1-5, where 5 is the most repressive. As Figure 1 illustrates, there is a direct link between terrorism and repression, which are correlated at the .01 level of statistical significance ($r = .52$). Specifically, I have found that terrorist incidents lead to repression and not the other way around.



The issue is to put human rights violations in a context that should especially be familiar to Americans. How else do many in the U.S. attempt to excuse the numerous human rights abuses that their government is reportedly committing in their so-called “war on terror”, other than to say that these abuses are regrettably inevitable or even necessary? While I do not wish to justify repression, it is important to question a policy of intervention that is predicated on a deep moral chasm that exists between the Syrian and U.S. governments.

It is by no means certain, moreover, that al Nusra and other radical elements of the rebellion – which, as I explain below, are likely to play a predominant role in any post-Assad government – would be more respectful of human rights. Given the numerous summary executions that they have committed (including brutal beheadings captured on video), as well as reports of desecrated churches and monasteries, massacres of Allawites, Kurds, and so on.

Popular conception 4: Assad has brutally cracked down on peaceful protestors

On a related note, it is necessary to address the conventional wisdom that government or pro-government forces have been killing demonstrators. A very brief history lesson is in order. There were demonstrations throughout the period of January to Mid-March 2011, during which there were no reports of security forces using lethal force against protestors (see Human Rights Watch 2011, and Agence France Presse 2011a). It was not until March 18, in the town of Daraa, that demonstrators were reportedly shot dead (Agence France Press 2011b). What explains this change in the severity of the government’s response?

What is not mentioned in most mainstream accounts is that, on that same day, seven political officers were slain during these supposedly peaceful demonstrations. In addition, a courthouse and the town’s Ba’ath Party headquarters were burned down. This was reported in the Israel National News (Kahn 2011), which cannot be expected to have a pro-Damascus bias. This undermines the popular argument that protests transformed into an armed rebellion as a consequence of a nationwide, lethal crackdown on peaceful demonstrators. While there certainly were such protestors, it seems equally certain that there were militants among them from the beginning.

Popular conception 5: moderates dominate Syria's rebels

The most notorious of Syria's rebel groups, the Al Nusra Front, has been described by the Washington Post as "the most aggressive and successful arm of the rebel force" (Ignatius 2012), and by CNN as the "best-equipped" and the "most effective fighting force against the Syrian regime" (Bergen 2013). Along with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (previously known as al Qaeda in Iraq), al Nusra has also been designated by our government as a terrorist organization (Al Jazeera 2012). Are such radical groups the exception to the rule? Are they outnumbered by more moderate, secular forces, as many in our political establishment would like us to believe?

In a widely discussed report, it was found that nearly half of Syria's rebels are jihadists or hardline Islamists.[6] Only a small minority of the rebels are tied to secular groups. This contrasts sharply with the view endorsed by Senator John McCain and Secretary of State John Kerry, who cited a Wall Street Journal op-ed (O'Bagy 2013) claiming that a majority of rebels in Syria are moderate (Winsor 2013). The author of that op-ed, who had represented herself as an unbiased observer (Abramson 2013), was later discovered to be affiliated with a pro-Syria rebel group. (Weinger and Brannen 2013).

In short, there is good reason to believe that if the Assad government is defeated, such radical groups as al Nusra could play a role in any post-Assad government.

Popular conception 6: Assad has killed over 100,000 people

To begin, this figure should be taken with a grain of salt. When you look at specific events, the range of estimated deaths is often quite wide, and partisans choose whichever end of the range of estimates that suits their bias. The chemical attack in Ghouta is a prime example - the U.S. claims that over 1,400 people have died, whereas many groups provide estimates that are far lower (e.g., Doctors without Borders, for instance, estimated that 355 had died) (Dozier 2013). [The evidence also suggests that most of the deaths blamed on the government are attributable to the rebels. GR Ed]

Second, it must never be forgotten that this is a war, and people die in wars; that is why they are so tragic (the U.S. civil war is estimated to have resulted in over 600,000 deaths, roughly six times higher than those believed to have been killed in Syria). Further, it is important not to assume, as some do, that Assad is responsible for every death.[7] It was reported that over 40 percent of those who died are government soldiers and pro-government militia members (Enders 2013). It is difficult to gauge how many civilians were killed by the rebels, but there is plenty of documented evidence that many were.

Further, it is important to inquire on what helped to bring about this situation in the first place. In 2001, it was revealed to US Army General Wesley Clark that the US was planning to attack and remove the government of Syria, as well as those of 6 other countries (Democracy Now! 2007). Back in 2007, Seymour Martin Hersh reported in the New Yorker that the US and friends were taking part in covert operations against Syria, a by-product of which was the strengthening of extremist groups that are hostile to the United States (Hersh 2007). In short, the U.S. government has not only facilitated the rise of this supposed rebellion, but has also emboldened them to wage war by giving them every reason to believe that the U.S. will come to their defense if the balance of power comes to shift in Assad's favor.

Such a shift, as well the corresponding effort to legitimate an overt military intervention in Syria, has evidently occurred. In a manner reminiscent of the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident, Hersh (2013) reported that “the Obama administration had altered the available information – in terms of its timing and sequence – to enable the president and his advisers to make intelligence retrieved days after the attack look as if it had been picked up and analysed in real time, as the attack was happening.”

Popular conception 7: Assad deployed chemical weapons on civilians

Here I will be focusing most of my attention on the horrific August 21 attack in Ghouta. As even the Associated Press has observed, there is no concrete evidence linking Assad to this event (Karam and Dozier 2013). Nevertheless, it is worth examining the evidence that President Obama and allies have cited in their effort to justify a military strike on Syria.

Intercepted military communications

Washington has claimed that the order to deploy sarin nerve gas in Ghouta was intercepted. However, they have failed to publicly disclose this evidence; there are no transcripts of these communications (Karam and Dozier 2013). So, one is forced to take on faith what the U.S. intelligence community is presented as saying (similar to what was done back in 2003).

The chemical weapons were fired from a regime-controlled area

Some have read into the eagerly-anticipated UN report on its investigation of the August 21, 2013 chemical attacks in Ghouta that, given the calculated trajectory of the rockets, we should conclude that they were fired from a regime-controlled area (e.g., see Schofield 2013). However, it was explicitly noted in the UN report that the sites of the attack:

“Have been well travelled by other individuals both before and during the investigation. Fragments and other possible evidence have clearly been handled/moved prior to the arrival of the investigation team (United Nations 2013).”

The rebels could not have carried out this attack

The U.S. has lost track of who is in control of Syria’s chemical weapons. The Associated Press reported that “U.S. analysts...are...not certain that when they saw what looked like Assad’s forces moving chemical supplies, those forces were able to remove everything before rebels took over an area where weapons had been stored (Daily Herald 2013).”

Therefore, we cannot rule out the possibility that rebels seized such weapons from the government’s stockpiles. Further, despite the conventional view that the weapons were far too technologically sophisticated to be in the rebel’s possession, Hersh(2013) relays the testimony of Theodore Postol, a professor of technology and national security, who, together with colleagues, concluded that they could be produced “in a modestly capable machine shop’.Hersh identifies other problems in the official narrative of what transpired on August 21 that are not given due consideration in the mainstream press.

Motives

It really seems to defy logic for Assad to use chemical weapons while UN inspectors were on the ground, knowing full well that if he were found to use such weapons and therefore cross

this proverbial “red line”, powerful countries would finally have the excuse they were arguably seeking to attack his country.

Evidence implicating the rebels

Lastly, evidence that rebels are in possession of, and have used, chemical weapons has systematically been downplayed by (e.g., see Today’s Zaman 2013). Regarding the actual use of such weapons, a chemical attack allegedly occurred on March 19, 2013 in the predominantly Shia town of Khan al-Assal, resulting in 25 deaths. 64% of those killed were soldiers from the Syrian Arab Army (Holmes and Solomon 2013). A reporter from the Telegraph thought it “unusual” that the Syrian government requested a UN investigation into the incident (Thomson 2013). Perhaps such requests would seem less bizarre if one did not proceed from the default assumption that Assad is responsible for every reported atrocity. Once this assumption is discarded, one might come to appreciate the relevance of the sectarian composition of the town and the specific casualties of the attack.

Rarely do mainstream media outlets recognize the conclusion drawn by Carla del Ponte, a member of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic: “...according to what we have established so far, it is at the moment opponents of the regime who are using sarin gas” (McElroy 2013). Nevertheless, the U.S. government stressed that there was “no evidence that the opposition possesses sarin,” even though the “CIA had [months earlier] briefed the Obama administration on al-Nusra and its work with sarin, and had sent alarming reports that another Sunni fundamentalist group active in Syria, al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), also understood the science of producing sarin.

Conclusion

Public support for, or tolerance of, interventionist foreign policies frequently rests on a mythical vilification of the designated enemy.

Syria, primarily in the context of its ongoing internationalized civil war, is illustrative of this process. By decontextualizing, and promoting a partial (and often demonstrably false) narrative of, human rights conditions in Syria, states, media, and non-governmental organizations have sought to legitimate a policy of intervention that is overtly hostile to the Assad regime, and deleterious to the average Syrian. In this paper, I have sought to provide a corrective to the misperceptions that underlies this policy. Only an objective depiction of the Syrian crisis – in which the regime is neither excused nor demonized – can contribute to efforts to craft a more just foreign policy towards Syria.

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Notes

1. An English translation of the 2012 Constitution is available on the United Nations Relief Agency website at <http://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/tehis/vtx/rwmain?docid=5100f02a2>.
2. An interview was recently published in The Economist with a fighter from what has been described as the most powerful rebel force in Syria, the al Nusra front. Not mincing his words, he opined that "[those] who want democracy are infidels." See "An Interview with Jabhat al-Nusra," The Economist, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/pomegranate/2013/05/syrias-fighters-0> (accessed October 2, 2013).
3. For example, see "Arabs want Syria's President Assad to Go - Opinion poll," 2012, The Doha Debates, <http://www.thedohadebates.com/news/item/index.asp?n=14312> (Accessed October 9, 2013), and Camille Otrakji, 2012, "Analyzing the Largest Syria Crisis Facebook Polls," The Syria Page, <http://creativesyria.com/syriapage/?p=129> (Accessed October 8, 2013). Also, for a critique of the first study, see Charlotte McDonald, 2012, "Do 55% of Syrians Really Want President Assad to Stay?," BBC, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17155349> (Accessed October 9, 2013).
4. To obtain data, visit the Global Terrorism Database, <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>.

5. To obtain data, visit the Political Terror Scale website, <http://www.politicalterrorsscale.org/>.

6. For a summary of the report, see Ben Farmer, 2013, "Syria: Nearly Half Rebel Fighters are Jihadists or Hardline Islamists, Says IHS Jane's Report," The Telegraph, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10311007/Syria-nearly-half-rebel-fighters-are-jihadists-or-hardline-Islamists-says-IHS-janes-report.html>.

8. As U.S. Senator, John McCain, has stated, "the fact is [Syrian President] Bashar Assad has massacred 100,000 people." See "Responsibility to Protect?", Foreign Policy, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/09/17/responsibility_to_protect (Accessed September 25, 2013).

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