

NGOs and Media Disinformation: How We Were Misled About Syria by Amnesty International

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

*Most of us living outside Syria know very little of the country or its recent history. What we think we know comes via the media. Information that comes with the endorsement of an organisation like Amnesty International we may tend to assume is reliable. Certainly, I **always trusted Amnesty International implicitly, believing I understood and shared its moral commitments.***

As a decades-long supporter, I never thought to check the reliability of its reporting. Only on seeing the organisation last year relaying messages from the infamous White Helmets did questions arise for me.[1] Having since discovered a [problem about the witness testimonies provided by Doctors Without Borders](#) (MSF), I felt a need to look more closely at Amnesty International's reporting.[2] **Amnesty had been influential in forming public moral judgements about the rights and wrongs of the war in Syria.**

What if Amnesty's reporting on the situation in Syria was based on something other than verified evidence?[3] What if misleading reports were instrumental in fuelling military conflicts that might otherwise have been more contained, or even avoided?

Amnesty International first alleged war crimes in Syria, against the government of President Bashar Al-Assad, in June 2012.[4] If a war crime involves a breach of the laws of war, and application of those laws presupposes a war, it is relevant to know how long the Syrian government had been at war, assuming it was. The UN referred to a 'situation close to civil war' in December 2011.[5] Amnesty International's war crimes in Syria were therefore reported on the basis of evidence that would have been gathered, analysed, written up, checked, approved and published within six months.[6] That is astonishingly - and worryingly - quick.

The report does not detail its research methods, but a press release quotes at length, and exclusively, the words of Donatella Rovera who 'spent several weeks investigating human rights violations in northern Syria.'



As far as I can tell, the fresh evidence advertised in the report was gathered through conversations and tours Rovera had in those weeks.[7] Her report mentions that Amnesty International ‘had not been able to conduct research on the ground in Syria’.[8]

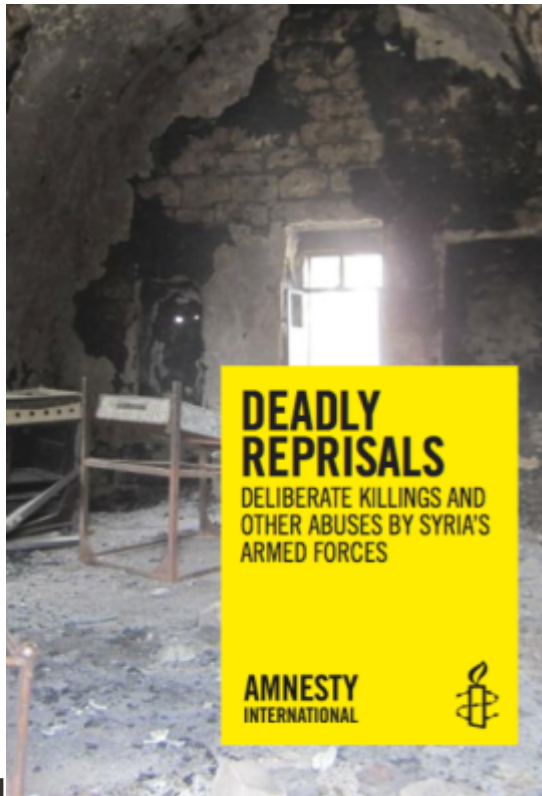
I am no lawyer, but I find it inconceivable that allegations of war crimes made on this basis would be taken seriously. Rovera herself was later to speak of problems with the investigation in Syria: in a reflective article published two years afterwards,[9] she gives examples of both material evidence and witness statements that had misled the investigation.[10] Such reservations did not appear on Amnesty’s website; I am not aware of Amnesty having relayed any caveats about the report, nor of its reviewing the war crimes allegations. What I find of greater concern, though, given that accusations of crimes already committed can in due course be tried, is that Amnesty also did not temper its calls for prospective action. On the contrary.

In support of its surprisingly quick and decisive stance on intervention, **Amnesty International was also accusing the Syrian government of crimes against humanity.** Already before *Deadly Reprisals*, the report *Deadly Detention* had alleged these. Such allegations can have grave implications because they can be taken as warrant for armed intervention.[11] Whereas war crimes do not occur unless there is a war, crimes against humanity can be considered a justification for going to war. And in war, atrocities can occur that would otherwise not have occurred.

I find this thought deeply troubling, particularly as a supporter of Amnesty International at the time it called for action, the foreseeable consequences of which included fighting and possible war crimes, by whomsoever committed, that might otherwise never have been. **Personally, I cannot quite escape the thought that in willing the means to an end one also shares some responsibility for their unintended consequences.**[12]

If Amnesty International considered the moral risk of indirect complicity in creating war crimes a lesser one than keeping silent about what it believed it had found in Syria, then **it must have had very great confidence in the findings. Was that confidence justified?**

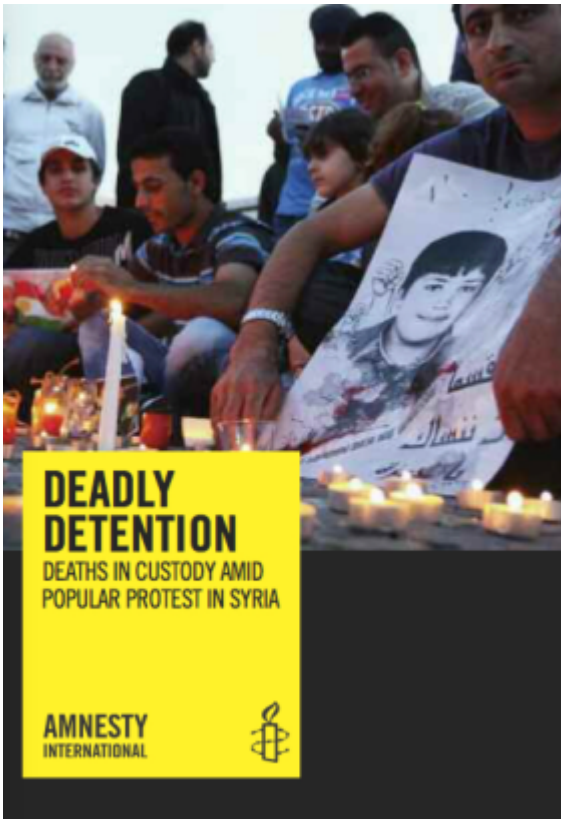
If we go back to human rights reports on Syria for the year 2010, before the conflict began, we find Amnesty International recorded a number of cases of wrongful detention and



brutality.[13]

In the ten years Bashar Al-Assad had been president, the human rights situation seemed to Western observers not to have improved as markedly as they had hoped. Human Rights Watch spoke of 2000-2010 as a 'wasted decade'.^[14] The consistent tenor of reports was disappointment: advances achieved in some areas had to be set against continued problems in others. We also know that in some rural parts of Syria, there was real frustration at the government's priorities and policies.^[15] An agricultural economy hobbled by the poorly managed effects of severe drought had left the worst off feeling marginalized. Life may have been good for many in vibrant cities, but it was far from idyllic for everyone, and there remained scope to improve the human rights record. The government's robust approach to groups seeking an end to the secular state of Syria was widely understood to need monitoring for reported excesses. Still, **the pre-war findings of monitors, are a long way from any suggestion of crimes against humanity.** That includes the findings of [Amnesty International Report 2011: the state of the world's human rights](#).

A report published just three months later portrays a dramatically different situation.^[16] **In the period from April to August 2011, events on the ground had certainly moved quickly in the wake of anti-government protests in parts of the country, but so had Amnesty.**



In promoting the new report, [Deadly Detention](#), Amnesty International USA notes with pride how the organisation is now providing ‘real-time documentation of human rights abuses committed by government forces’. Not only is it providing rapid reporting, it is also making strong claims. Instead of measured statements suggesting necessary reforms, it now condemns Assad’s government for ‘a widespread, as well as systematic, attack against the civilian population, carried out in an organized manner and pursuant to a state policy to commit such an attack.’ **The Syrian government is accused of ‘crimes against humanity’**. [17]

The speed and confidence - as well as the implied depth of insight - of the report are remarkable. The report is worrying, too, given how portentous is its damning finding against the government: Amnesty International ‘called on the UN Security Council to not only condemn, in a firm and legally binding manner, the mass human rights violations being committed in Syria but also to take other measures to hold those responsible to account, including by referring the situation in Syria to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. As well, Amnesty International continues to urge the Security Council to impose an arms embargo on Syria and to immediately freeze the assets of President al-Assad and other officials suspected of responsibility for crimes against humanity.’ With such strongly-worded statements as this, especially in a context where powerful foreign states are already calling for ‘regime change’ in Syria, Amnesty’s contribution could be seen as throwing fuel on a fire.

Since it is not just the strength of the condemnation that is noteworthy, but the swiftness of its delivery - *in ‘real-time’* - **a question that Amnesty International supporters might consider is how the organisation can provide instantaneous coverage of events while also fully investigating and verifying the evidence.**

Amnesty International's reputation rests on the quality of its research. The organisation's Secretary General, Salil Shetty, has clearly stated the principles and methods adhered to when gathering evidence:

'we do it in a very systematic, primary, way where we collect evidence with our own staff on the ground. And every aspect of our data collection is based on corroboration and cross-checking from all parties, even if there are, you know, many parties in any situation because of all of the issues we deal with are quite contested. So it's very important to get different points of view and constantly cross check and verify the facts.'[18]

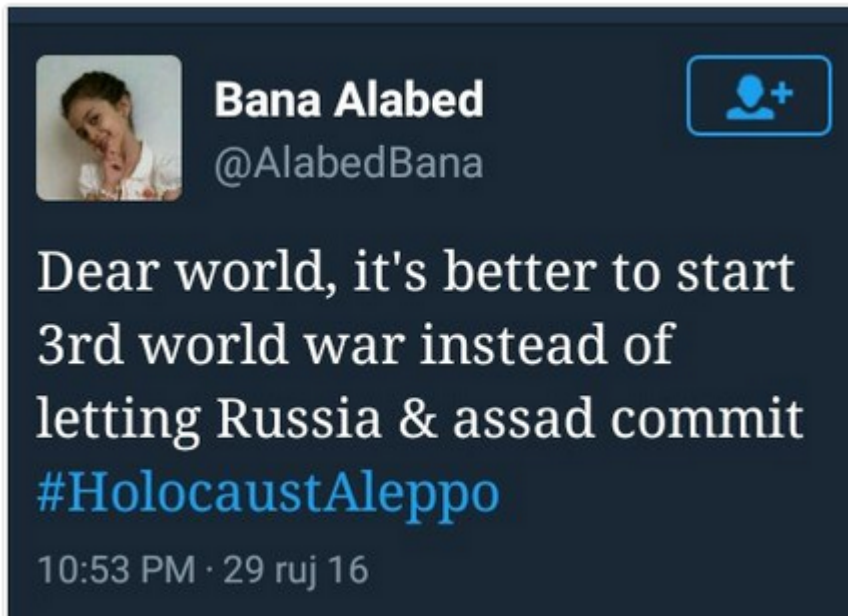
Amnesty thus sets itself rigorous standards of research, and assures the public that it is scrupulous in adhering to them. This is only to be expected, I think, especially when grave charges are to be levelled against a government.

Did Amnesty follow its own research protocol in preparing the *Deadly Detention* report? Was it: *systematic, primary, collected by Amnesty's own staff, on the ground, with every aspect of data collection verified by corroboration and by cross-checking with all parties concerned?*

In the analysis appended here as a note [- [19] -] I show, point by point, that **the report admits failing to fulfil some of these criteria and fails to show it has met any of them.**

Given that the findings could be used to support calls for humanitarian intervention in Syria, the least to expect of the organization would be application of its own prescribed standards of proof.

Lest it be thought that focusing on the technicalities of research methodology risks letting the government off the hook for egregious crimes, it really needs to be stressed - as was originally axiomatic for Amnesty International - that we should never make a presumption of guilt without evidence or trial.[20] Quite aside from technical questions, **getting it wrong about who is the perpetrator of war crimes could lead to the all too real consequences of mistakenly intervening on the side of the actual perpetrators.**



Suppose it nevertheless be insisted that the evidence clearly enough shows Assad to be presiding over mass destruction of his own country and slaughter in his own people: surely the 'international community' should intervene on the people's behalf against this alleged 'mass murderer'?[21] In the climate of opinion and with the state of knowledge abroad at the time, that may have sounded a plausible proposition. It was not the only plausible proposition, however, and certainly not in Syria itself. Another was that the best sort of support to offer the people of Syria would lie in pressing the government more firmly towards reforms while assisting it, as was becoming increasingly necessary, in ridding the territory of terrorist insurgents who had fomented and then exploited the tensions in the original protests of Spring 2011.[22] For even supposing the government's agents of internal security needed greater restraint, the best way to achieve this is not necessarily to undermine the very government that would be uniquely well-placed, with support and constructive incentives, to apply it.

I do not find it obvious that Amnesty was either obliged or competent to decide between these alternative hypotheses. Since it nevertheless chose to do so, we have to ask why it pre-emptively dismissed the method of deciding proposed by President Al-Assad himself. This was his undertaking to hold an election to ask the people whether they wanted him to stay or go.



Although not widely reported in the West, and virtually ignored by Amnesty[23] – **a presidential election was held in 2014, with the result being a landslide victory for Bashar Al-Assad.** He won 10,319,723 votes – 88.7% of the vote – with a turnout put at 73.42%.[24]

Western observers did not challenge those numbers or allege voting irregularities,[25] with the media instead seeking to downplay their significance. ‘This is not an election that can be analysed in the same way as a multi-party, multi-candidate election in one of the established European democracies or in the US, says the BBC’s Jeremy Bowen in Damascus. It was an act of homage to President Assad by his supporters, which was boycotted and rejected by opponents rather than an act of politics, he adds.’[26] This homage, nonetheless, was paid by an outright majority of Syrians. To refer to this as ‘meaningless’, as US Secretary of State, John Kerry did,[27] reveals something of how much his own regime respected the people of Syria. It is true that voting could not take place in opposition-held areas, but participation overall was so great that even assuming the whole population in those areas would have voted against him, they would still have had to accept Assad as legitimate winner – rather as we in Scotland have to accept Theresa May as UK prime minister. In fact, the recent liberation of eastern Aleppo has revealed Assad’s government actually to have support there.

We cannot know if Assad would have been so many people’s first choice under other circumstances, but we can reasonably infer that the people of Syria saw in his leadership their best hope for unifying the country around the goal of ending the bloodshed. Whatever some might more ideally have sought – including as expressed in the authentic protests of 2011 – the will of the Syrian people quite clearly was, under the *actual* circumstances, for their government to be allowed to deal with their problems, rather than be supplanted by foreign-sponsored agencies.[28]

(I am tempted to add the thought, as a political philosopher, that BBC’s Jeremy Bowen could be right in saying the election was no normal ‘act of politics’: Bashar Al-Assad has always been clear in statements and interviews that his position is inextricably bound up with the

Syrian constitution. He didn't choose to give up a career in medicine to become a dictator, as I understand it; rather, the chance event of his older brother's death altered his plans. Until actual evidence suggests otherwise, I am personally prepared to believe that Assad's otherwise incomprehensible steadfastness of purpose does indeed stem from a commitment to defending his country's constitution. **Whether or not the people really wanted this person as president is secondary to the main question whether they were prepared to give up their national constitution to the dictates of any body other than that of the Syrian people.** Their answer to this has a significance, as Bowen inadvertently notes, that is beyond mere politics.)

Since the Syrian people had refuted the proposition that Amnesty had been promoting, serious questions have be asked. Among these, one - which would speak to a defence of Amnesty - is whether it had some independent justification - coming from sources of information other than its own investigations - for genuinely believing its allegations against the Syrian government well-founded. However, since an affirmative answer to that question would not refute the point I have sought to clarify here I shall set them aside for a separate discussion in the next episode of this investigation.

My point for now is that Amnesty International itself had not independently justified its own advocacy position. This is a concern for anyone who thinks it should take full responsibility for the monitoring it reports. Further discussion has also to address concerns about what kinds of advocacy it should be engaged in at all.[29]



NOTES

[1] For background on concern about the White Helmets, a concise overview is provided in the video [White Helmets: first responders or Al Qaeda support group?](#) For a more thorough discussion, see the accessible but richly referenced summary provided by [Jan Oberg](#). On the basis of all the

information now widely available, and in view of the consistency between numerous critical accounts, which contrasts with the incoherence of the official narrative as made famous by Netflix, I have come to mistrust testimony sourced from the White Helmets when it conflicts with testimony of independent journalists on the ground – especially since reports of the latter are also consistent with those of the people of eastern Aleppo who have been able to share the truth of their own experiences since the liberation (for numerous interviews with people from Aleppo, see the [Youtube channel of Vanessa Beeley](#); see also the [moving photographic journals of Jan Oberg](#).)

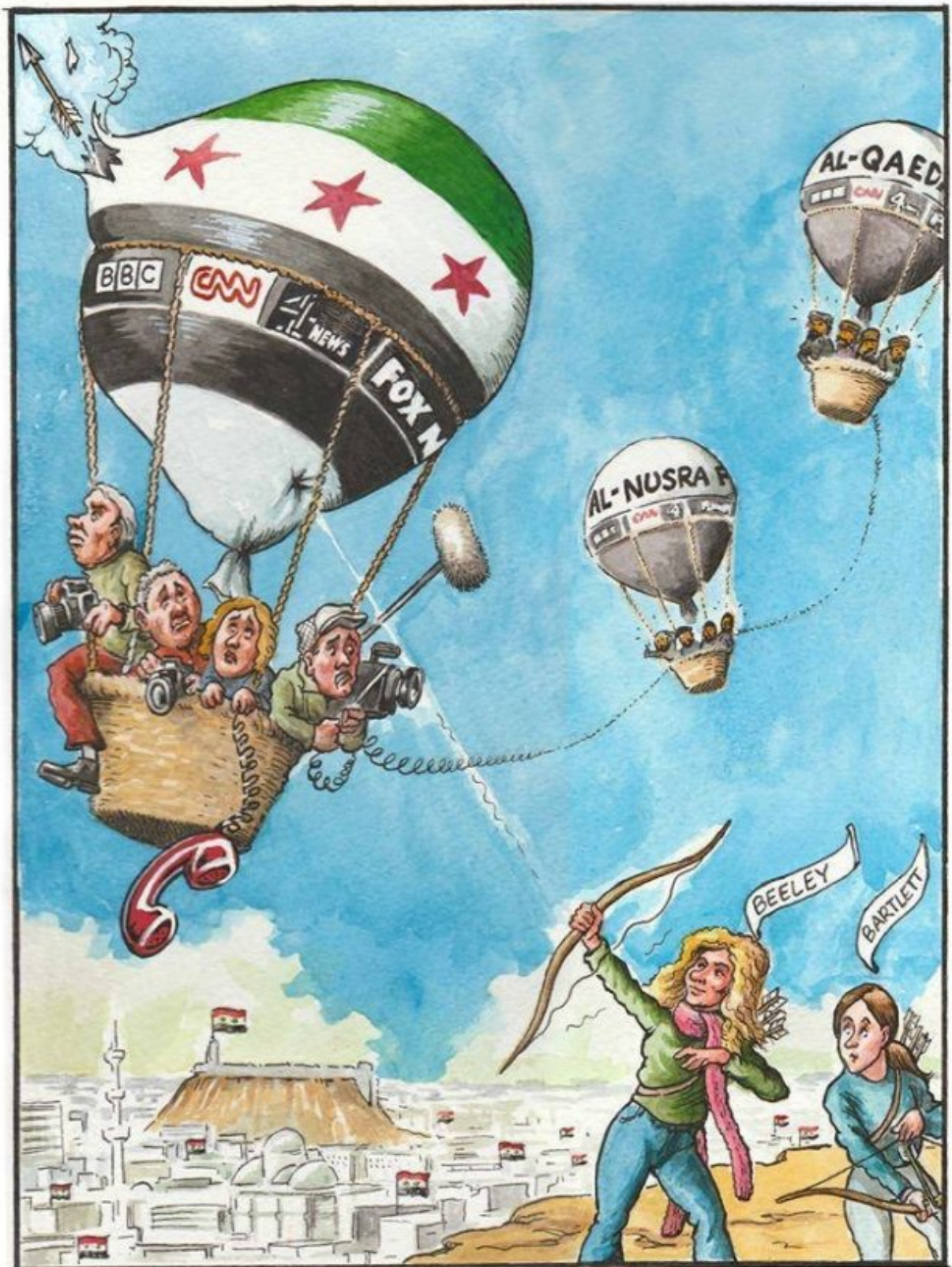
There have certainly been efforts to debunk the various exposés of the White Helmets, and the latest I know of (at the time of writing) concerns the confession featured in the video (linked above) of Abdulhadi Kamel. According to Middle East eye, his colleagues in the White Helmets believe the confession was beaten out of him (report as at 15 Jan 2017) in a notorious government detention centre

(<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syrian-white-helmet-fake-confession-filmed-assad-regime-intelligence-prison-344419324>); according to Amnesty International, which does not mention that report in its appeal of 20 Jan 2017, states that there is no evidence he was a White Helmet and it is not known what happened to him

(<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2017/01/man-missing-during-east-aleppo-evacuation/>). What I take from this is that some people want to defend the White Helmets, but that they cannot even agree a consistent story to base it on under the pressure of unexpected events in Aleppo showing behind the scenes – literally – of the Netflix version of events. It is also hardly reassuring about the quality of AI's monitoring in Syria.

[2] My critical inquiry about Doctors Without Borders (MSF) was sparked by learning that their testimony was being used to criticise claims being made about Syria by the independent journalist [Eva Bartlett](#). Having found her reporting credible, I felt compelled to discover which account to believe. I found that MSF had been misleading about what they could really claim to know in Syria.

In response to that article, several people pointed to related concerns about Amnesty International. So I had the temerity to start questioning Amnesty International on the basis of pointers and tips given by several of my new friends, and I would like to thank particularly Eva Bartlett, Vanessa Beeley, Patrick J. Boyle, Adrian D., and Rick Sterling for specific suggestions. I have also benefited from work by Tim Anderson, Jean Bricmont, Tony Cartalucci, Stephen Gowans, Daniel Kovalic, Barbara McKenzie, and Coleen Rowley. I would like to thank Gunnar Øyro, too, for producing a rapid [Norwegian translation](#) of the MSF article which has helped it reach more people. In fact, there are a great many others too, that have I learned so much from in these few weeks, among what I have come to discover is a rapidly expanding movement of citizen investigators and journalists all around the globe. It's one good thing to come out of these terrible times. Thanks to you all!



SYRIA: Independent Journalism's Aim Strikes True R.A

[3] For instance, it is argued by Tim Anderson, in [The Dirty War on Syria](#) (2016), that Amnesty has been 'embedded', along with the Western media, and has been following almost unwaveringly the line from Washington rather than providing independent evidence and analysis.

[4] The report [Deadly Reprisals](#) concluded that 'Syrian government forces and militias are responsible for grave human rights violations and serious violations of international humanitarian

law amounting to crimes against humanity and war crimes.’

[5] [http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=40595 - .WIGzeZlpGHk](http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=40595-.WIGzeZlpGHk)

[6] ‘In the areas of the governorates of Idlib and Aleppo, where Amnesty International carried out its field research for this report, the fighting had reached the level and intensity of a non-international armed conflict. This means that the laws of war (international humanitarian law) also apply, in addition to human rights law, and that many of the abuses documented here would also amount to war crimes.’ [Deadly Reprisals](#), p.10.

[7] Rovera’s account was contradicted at the time by other witness testimonies, as reported, for instance, in the [Badische Zeitung](#), which claimed responsibility for deaths was attributed to the wrong side. One-sidedness in the account is also heavily criticized by Louis Denghien <http://www.infosyrie.fr/decryptage/lenorme-mensonge-fondateur-de-donatella-rovera/> Most revealing, however, is the article I go on to mention in the text, in which Rovera herself two years later effectively retracts her own evidence (‘[Challenges of monitoring, reporting, and fact-finding during and after armed conflict](#)’). This article is not published on Amnesty’s own site, and is not mentioned by Amnesty anywhere, as far as I know. I commend it to anyone who thinks my conclusion about *Deadly Reprisals* might itself be too hasty. I think it could make salutary reading for some of her colleagues, like the one who published the extraordinarily defensive dismissal of critical questions about the report in [Amnesty’s blog on 15 June 2012](#), which, I would say, begs every question it claims to answer. (The author just keeps retorting that the critics hadn’t been as critical about opposition claims. I neither know nor care whether they were. I only wanted to learn if he had anything to say in reply to the actual criticisms made.) While appreciating that people who work for Amnesty feel passionately about the cause of the vulnerable, and I would not wish it otherwise, I do maintain that professional discipline is appropriate in discussions relating to evidence.

[8] ‘For more than a year from the onset of the unrest in 2011, Amnesty International – like other international human rights organizations – had not been able to conduct research on the ground in Syria as it was effectively barred from entering the country by the government.’ ([Deadly Reprisals](#), p.13)

[9] Donatella Rovera, [Challenges of monitoring, reporting, and fact-finding during and after armed conflict](#), Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection (PHAP) 2014.

[10] The article is worth reading in full for its reflective insight into a number of difficulties and obstacles in the way of reliable reporting from the field, but here is an excerpt particularly relevant to the Syria case: ‘Access to relevant areas during the conduct of hostilities may be restricted or outright impossible, and often extremely dangerous when possible. Evidence may be rapidly removed, destroyed, or contaminated – whether intentionally or not. “Bad” evidence can be worse than no evidence, as it can lead to wrong assumptions or conclusions. In Syria I found unexploded cluster sub-munitions in places where no cluster bomb strikes were known to have been carried out. Though moving unexploded cluster sub-munitions is very dangerous, as even a light touch can cause them to explode, Syrian fighters frequently gather them from the sites of government strikes and transport them to other locations, sometimes a considerable distance away, in order to harvest explosive and other material for re-use. The practice has since become more widely known, but at the time of the first cluster bomb strikes, two years ago, it led to wrong assumptions about the locations of such strikes. ... Especially in the initial stages of armed conflicts, civilians are confronted with wholly unfamiliar realities – armed clashes, artillery strikes, aerial bombardments, and other military activities and situations they have never experienced before – which can make it very difficult for them to accurately describe specific incidents.’ ([Challenges of monitoring, reporting, and](#)

[fact-finding during and after armed conflict](#)) In light of Rovera's candour, one is drawn to an inescapable contrast with the stance of Amnesty International, the organization. Not only did it endorse the report uncritically, in the first place, it continued to issue reports of a similar kind, and to make calls for action on the basis of them.

[11] 'This disturbing new evidence of an organized pattern of grave abuses highlights the pressing need for decisive international action ... For more than a year the UN Security Council has dithered, while a human rights crisis unfolded in Syria. It must now break the impasse and take concrete action to end to these violations and to hold to account those responsible.' [Deadly Reprisals](#) press release. The executive director of Amnesty International USA at that time was on record as favouring a Libya-like response to the Syria 'problem'. Speaking shortly after her appointment she expressed her frustration that the Libya approach had not already been adopted for Syria: 'Last spring the Security Council managed to forge a majority for forceful action in Libya and it was initially very controversial, [causing] many misgivings among key Security Council members. But Gaddafi fell, there's been a transition there and I think one would have thought those misgivings would have died down. And yet we've seen just a continued impasse over Syria... .' Quoted in Coleen Rowley, '[Selling War as "Smart Power"](#)' (28 Aug 2012)

[12] The question of what Amnesty International as an organization can be said to have 'willed' is complex. One reason is that it is an association of so many people and does not have a simple 'will'. Another is that public statements are often couched in language that can convey a message but with word choice that allows deniability of any particular intent should that become subject to criticism or censure. This practice in itself I find unwholesome, personally, and I think it ought to be entirely unnecessary for an organization with Amnesty's moral mission. For a related critical discussion of Amnesty International's 'interventionism' in Libya see e.g. Daniel Kovalik '[Amnesty International and the Human Rights Industry](#)' (2012). Coleen Rowley received from Amnesty International, in response to criticisms by her, the assurance 'we do not take positions on armed intervention.' ([The Problem with Human Rights/Humanitarian Law Taking Precedence over the Nuremberg Principle: Torture is Wrong but So Is the Supreme War Crime](#)', 2013). Rowley shows how this response, unlike a clear stance against intervention, shows some creativity. I also note in passing, that in the same response Amnesty assure us 'AI's advocacy is based on our own independent research into human rights abuses in a given country.' This, going by the extent to which AI reports cite reports from other organisations, I would regard as *economical* with the truth.

In my next blog on Amnesty International, the role of [Suzanne Nossel](#), sometime executive director of Amnesty International USA, will be discussed, and in that context further relevant information will be forthcoming about the purposes Amnesty's testimony was serving in the period 2011-12.

[13] Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review, October 2011, '[End human rights violations in Syria](#)'. Without wanting to diminish the significance of every single human rights abuse, I draw attention here to the scale of the problem that is recorded prior to 2011 for the purpose of comparison with later reports. Thus I note that the US State Department does not itemise egregious failings: 'There was at least one instance during the year when the authorities failed to protect those in its custody. ... There were reports in prior years of prisoners beating other prisoners while guards stood by and watched.' In 2010 (May 28) Amnesty had reported 'several suspicious deaths in custody': <http://www.amnestyusa.org/research/reports/annual-report-syria-2010>. Its briefing to Committee on Torture speaks in terms of scores of cases in the period 2004-2010: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/008/2010/en/>

For additional reference, these reports also indicate that the most brutal treatment tends to be meted out against Islamists and particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. There are also complaints from

Kurds. A small number of lawyers and journalists are mentioned too.

[14] Human Rights Watch (2010), '[A Wasted Decade: Human Rights in Syria during Bashar al-Assad's First Ten Years in Power](#)'.

[15] According to one account: 'As a result of four years of severe drought, farmers and herders have seen their livelihoods destroyed and their lifestyles transformed, becoming disillusioned with government promises of plenty in rural areas. In the disjuncture between paternalistic promises of resource redistribution favoring Syria's peasantry and corporatist pacts binding regime interests to corrupt private endeavors, one may begin to detect the seeds of Syrian political unrest. ... the regime's failure to put in place economic measures to alleviate the effects of drought was a critical driver in propelling such massive mobilizations of dissent. In these recent months, Syrian cities have served as junctures where the grievances of displaced rural migrants and disenfranchised urban residents meet and come to question the very nature and distribution of power. ... I would argue that a critical impetus in driving Syrian dissent today has been the government's role in further marginalizing its key rural populace in the face of recent drought. Numerous international organizations have acknowledged the extent to which drought has crippled the Syrian economy and transformed the lives of Syrian families in myriad irreversible ways.' Suzanne Saleeby (2012) '[Sowing the Seeds of Dissent: Economic Grievances and the Syrian Social Contract's Unraveling](#)'.

[16] The names, dates, and reporting periods of reports relevant here are easily confused, so here are further details. The *Amnesty International Report 2011: the state of the world's human rights* mentioned in the text just here reports on the calendar year 2010, and it was published on May 13 2011. The separate report published in August 2011 is entitled *Deadly Detention: deaths in custody amid popular protest in Syria* and covers events during 2011 up to 15 August 2011.

[17] Crimes against humanity are a special and egregious category of wrongdoing: they involve acts that are *deliberately* committed as part of a *widespread or systematic attack* directed against a civilian population. Whereas ordinary crimes are a matter for a state to deal with internally, crimes against humanity, especially if committed by a state, can make that state subject to redress from the international community.

[18] Salil Shetty interviewed in 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Unl-cslUmp8>

[19] Was the research systematic? The organising of data collection takes time, involving procedures of design, preparation, execution and delivery; the systematic analysis and interpretation of data involves a good deal of work; the writing up needs to be properly checked for accuracy. Furthermore, to report reliably involves various kinds of subsidiary investigation in order to establish context and relevant variable factors that could influence the meaning and significance of data. Even then, once a draft report is written, it really needs to be checked by some expert reviewers for any unnoticed errors or omissions. Any presentation of evidence that shortcuts those processes could not, in my judgment, be regarded as systematic. I cannot imagine how such processes could be completed in short order, let alone 'in real-time', and so I can only leave it to readers to decide how systematic the research could have been.

Was the evidence gathered from primary sources? 'International researchers have interviewed witnesses and others who had fled Syria in recent visits to Lebanon and Turkey, and communicated by phone and email with individuals who remain in Syria ... they include relatives of victims, human rights defenders, medical professionals and newly released detainees. Amnesty International has also received information from Syrian and other

human rights activists who live outside Syria.’ Of all those sources, we could regard the testimony of newly released detainees as a primary source of information about conditions in prison. However, we are looking for evidence that would support the charge of committing crimes against humanity through ‘a *widespread*, as well as *systematic*, attack against the civilian population, carried out in an *organized* manner and *pursuant to a state policy* to commit such an attack’. On what basis Amnesty can claim definite knowledge of the extent of any attack and exactly who perpetrated it, or of how the government organizes the implementation of state policy, I do not see explained in the report.

Was the evidence collected by Amnesty’s staff on the ground? This question is answered in the report: “Amnesty International has not been able to conduct first-hand research on the ground in Syria during 2011” (p.5).

Was every aspect of data collection verified by corroboration? The fact that a number of identified individuals had died in violent circumstances is corroborated, but the report notes that ‘in very few cases has Amnesty International been able to obtain information indicating where a person was being detained at the time of their death. Consequently, this report uses qualified terms such as “reported arrests” and “reported deaths in custody”, where appropriate, in order to reflect this lack of clarity regarding some of the details of the cases reported.’

[This would corroborate descriptions of the pre-2011 situation regarding police brutality and deaths in custody. These are as unacceptable in Syria as they should be in all the other countries in which they occur, but to speak of ‘crimes against humanity’ implies an egregious systematic policy. I do not find anything in the report that claims to offer corroboration of the evidence that leads the report to state: ‘Despite these limitations, Amnesty International considers that the crimes behind the high number of reported deaths in custody of suspected opponents of the regime identified in this report, taken in the context of other crimes and human rights violations committed against civilians elsewhere in Syria, amount to crimes against humanity. They appear to be part of a widespread, as well as systematic, attack against the civilian population, carried out in an organized manner and pursuant to a state policy to commit such an attack.’]

As for corroboration of more widespread abuses and the claim that the government had a policy to commit what amount to crimes against humanity, I find none referred to.

Was the evidence relied on cross-checked with all parties concerned? Given that the government is charged, it would be a centrally concerned party, and the report makes clear the government has not been prepared to deal with Amnesty International. The non-cooperation of the government with Amnesty’s inquiries – whatever may be its reasons – cannot be offered as proof of its innocence. [That very phrase may jar with traditional Amnesty International supporters, given that a founding principle is the due process of assuming innocent before proven guilty. But I have allowed that some people might regard governments as relevantly different from individuals.] But since the government was not obliged to have dealings with Amnesty, and might have had other reasons not to, we must simply note that this aspect of the research methods protocol was not satisfied.

[20] I would note that a range of people have disputed whether there was any credible evidence, including former CIA intelligence officer Philip Giraldi <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/nato-vs-syria/> while also affirming that the American plan of destabilizing Syria and pursuing regime change had been hatched

years earlier. That, unlike the allegations against Assad, has been corroborated from a variety of sources. These include a former French foreign minister <http://www.globalresearch.ca/former-french-foreign-minister-the-war-against-syria-was-planned-two-years-before-the-arab-spring/5339112> and General Wesley Clark <http://www.globalresearch.ca/we-re-going-to-take-out-7-countries-in-5-years-iraq-syria-lebanon-libya-somalia-sudan-iran/5166>.

[21] Although quotation marks and the word *alleged* are invariably absent in mainstream references to accusations involving Assad, I retain them on principle since the simple fact of repeating an allegation does not suffice to alter its epistemic status. To credit the truth of a statement one needs evidence.

Lest it be said that there was plenty of other evidence, then I would suggest we briefly consider what Amnesty International, writing in 2016, would refer to as ‘the strongest evidence

yet’. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/03/from-hope-to-horror-five-years-of-crisis-in-syria/> (15 March 2016; accessed 11 January 2017) The evidence in question was the so-called Caesar photographs showing some 11,000 corpses alleged to have been tortured and executed by Assad’s people. A full discussion of this matter is not for a passing footnote like this, but I would just point out that this evidence was known to Amnesty and the world as of January 2014 and was discussed by Amnesty’s Philip Luther at the time of its publication. Referring to them as ‘[11,000 Reasons for Real Action in Syria](#)’, Luther admitted the causes or agents of the deaths had not been verified but spoke of them in terms that suggest verification was close to being a foregone conclusion (remember, this was five months before Assad’s election victory, so the scale of this alleged mass murder was knowledge in the public domain at election time). These ‘11,000 reasons’ clearly weighed with Amnesty, even if they could not quite verify them. To this day, though, the evidence has not been credibly certified, and I for one do not expect it will be. Some reasons why are those indicated by Rick Sterling in his critical discussion ‘[The Caesar Photo Fraud that Undermined Syrian Negotiations](#)’. Meanwhile, if Amnesty International’s people had thought up hypotheses to explain why the Syrian electors seemed so nonchalant about the supposed mass murdering of their president, they have not shared them.

[22] Although this was very much a minority perspective in the Western media, it was not entirely absent. *The Los Angeles Times* of 7 March 2012 carries a small item called ‘Syria Christians fear life after Assad’ <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/mar/07/world/la-fg-syria-christians-20120307> It articulates concerns about ‘whether Syria’s increasingly bloody, nearly yearlong uprising could shatter the veneer of security provided by President Bashar Assad’s autocratic but secular government. Warnings of a bloodbath if Assad leaves office resonate with Christians, who have seen their brethren driven away by sectarian violence since the overthrow of longtime strongmen in Iraq and in Egypt, and before that by a 15-year civil war in neighboring Lebanon.’ It notes ‘their fear helps explain the significant support he still draws’.

This well-founded fear of something worse should arguably have been taken into account in thinking about the proportionality of any military escalation. The LA Times article carries an interview: “‘Of course the ‘Arab Spring’ is an Islamist movement,” George said angrily. “It’s full of extremists. They want to destroy our country, and they call it a ‘revolution.’ “... Church leaders have largely aligned themselves behind the government, urging their followers to give Assad a chance to enact long-promised political reforms while also calling

for an end to the violence, which has killed more than 7,500 people on both sides, according to United Nations estimates.’ The LA Times carried several articles in a similar vein, including

these: http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/world_now/2012/03/church-fears-ethnic-cleansing-of-christians-in-homs-syria.html; <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2012-05-09/syria-christians-crisis/54888144/1>.

We also find that support for Assad’s presidency held up throughout the period following the initial protests: Since then, support for Assad has continued to hold up. Analysis of 2013 ORB

Poll: <http://russia-insider.com/en/nato-survey-2013-reveals-70-percent-syrians-support-assad/ri12011>.

[23] No mention is made to it on Amnesty’s webpages, and the annual report of 2014/15 offers a cursory mention conveying that the election was of no real significance: ‘In June, President al-Assad won presidential elections held only in government-controlled areas, and returned to office for a third seven-year term. The following week, he announced an amnesty, which resulted in few prisoner releases; the vast majority of prisoners of conscience and other political prisoners held by the government continued to be detained.’ (p.355, available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/0001/2015/en/>)

[24] Reported in the Guardian 4 June 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/04/bashar-al-assad-wins-reelection-in-landslide-victory>. The total population of Syria, including children, was 17,951,639 in 2014. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Syria

Although most of the Western press ignored or downplayed the result, there were some exceptions. The LA Times noted that ‘Assad’s regional and international supporters hailed his win as the elusive political solution to the crisis and a clear indication of Syrians’ will.’ <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-syria-prisoner-release-20140607-story.html> In a report on Fox News via Associated Press, too, there is a very clear description of the depth of support: Syrian election shows depth of popular support for Assad, even among Sunni majority. <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2014/06/04/syrian-election-shows-depth-popular-support-for-assad-even-among-sunni-majority.html> The report explains numerous reasons for the support, in a way that appears to give the lie to the usual mainstream narrative in the West.

The Guardian reports: ‘Securing a third presidential term is Assad’s answer to the uprising, which started in March 2011 with peaceful demonstrators calling for reforms but has since morphed into a fully fledged war that has shaken the Middle East and the world. And now, with an estimated 160,000 dead, millions displaced at home and abroad, outside powers backing both sides, and al-Qaida-linked jihadist groups gaining more control in the north and east, many Syrians believe that Assad alone is capable of ending the conflict.’

Steven MacMillan offers a pro-Assad account of the election in New Eastern Outlook <http://journal-neo.org/2015/12/20/bashar-al-assad-the-democratically-elected-president-of-syria/>

[25] Despite assertions from the states committed to ‘regime change’ that the election result should simply be disregarded, international observers found no fault to report with the

process <http://tass.com/world/734657>

[26] It is deemed of so little consequence by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office that its webpage on Syria, as last updated 21 January 2015 (and accessed 16 January 2017) still has this as its paragraph discussing a possible election in Syria in the future tense and with scepticism: 'there is no prospect of any free and fair election being held in 2014 while Assad remains in power.'

[27] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-27706471>

[28] A survey conducted in 2015 by **ORB International**, a company which specializes in public opinion research in fragile and conflict environments, still showed Assad to have more popular support than the opposition. The report is analysed by Stephen Gowans: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/bashar-al-assad-has-more-popular-support-than-the-western-backed-opposition-poll/5495643>

[29] For earlier and preliminary thoughts on the general question here see my short piece '[Amnesty International: is it true to its mission?](#)' (12 Jan 2017)

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