

Outright Lying: We Know about the Lies over Iraq but What about Syria?

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British wars abroad have two enemies. First, the official enemy, portrayed as a monster whom we always battle with noble intentions. But second is the enemy within – us, the public. The danger posed by the public is that we may stop elites doing what they want, hence we are subject to state ‘information operations’ to convey messages and obscure facts, usually via compliant media organisations. Current British policy in Syria, which is having the effect of prolonging the terrible war by supporting forces fighting the regime, involves outright lying by ministers at a level similar to that over Iraq in 2002-3.

The British government is [waging](#) ‘information warfare’ by funding media operations for some Syrian rebel groups. The Ministry of Defence is hiring contractors to produce videos, photos, radio broadcasts and social media posts branded with the logos of rebel groups, to ‘effectively run a press office for opposition fighters’. Materials are being circulated in the Arabic broadcast media and posted online with no indication of British government involvement.

But a key strand of government propaganda over Syria is often simply lying to parliament and the public. In July 2015, Defence Minister Earl Howe [told](#) Parliament that the government ‘would seek further Parliamentary approval before UK aircraft conducted air strikes in Syria’. This was untrue – British aircraft were already secretly striking Islamic State targets in Syria as was [revealed](#) by human rights organisation Reprieve six days after Howe’s statement. These air strikes, [conducted](#) by pilots embedded with US and Canadian forces, began months before Parliament voted in favour of them in December 2015.

The government also confirmed that neither Parliament nor the public should even be told of such operations. After Reprieve revealed the British role, the government [told](#) Parliament: ‘Ministers authorise the embedding of UK personnel on deployment with host forces. It has been long-standing practice not to announce such deployments’.

Also in June 2015, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon [told](#) MPs that the UK had ‘begun’ training Syrian forces in bases outside Syria. In fact, this programme started three years earlier. The Guardian had earlier [reported](#) that UK intelligence teams were giving Syrian army officers ‘logistical and other advice’ at bases in Jordan in a US-led programme begun in 2012. The report noted that while the government denied providing direct military training to the rebels, special forces were training the Jordanian military.

In September 2014, David Cameron [said](#) in a speech at the United Nations in New York that the UK would not deploy troops in Syria because 'I don't believe this threat of Islamist extremism will best be solved by Western ground troops directly trying to pacify or reconstruct Middle Eastern or African countries'. Yet within a year British Special Forces [were](#) 'mounting hit and run raids against Islamic State deep inside eastern Syria dressed as insurgent fighters'. SAS units dressed in black and flying Islamic State flags were being tasked with destroying IS equipment and munitions which insurgents constantly move to avoid coalition air strikes. British special forces now [frequently cross](#) into Syria to assist the New Syrian Army' from their base in Jordan.

Another issue is whether Britain has been supplying arms to the Syrian opposition. In July 2015, Foreign Minister Tobias Ellwood [told](#) Parliament that 'the UK does not provide lethal assistance to anyone in Syria'. Yet over two years earlier, it was [reported](#) that Britain had participated in 'a massive airlift of arms to Syrian rebels from Croatia', an operation led by the US and allegedly funded by Saudi Arabia. The New York Times [reported](#) later that year that a joint programme involving British, Saudi and US intelligence had sent weapons to rebels fighting in southern Syria.

American journalist Seymour Hersh [wrote](#) about an arms 'rat line' authorised in early 2012 that funnelled weapons and ammunition from Libya via southern Turkey and across the Syrian border to the opposition. MI6 supported this operation while funding came from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, according to Hersh, who added that 'many of those in Syria who ultimately received the weapons were jihadists, some of them affiliated with al-Qaida'.

Are any government statements on Syria believable? The government has consistently [told](#) Parliament it has no evidence that any UK air strikes in Syria or Iraq have resulted in civilian casualties. Yet Britain has conducted nearly 1,000 air strikes in these two countries since 2014 while the NGO, Airwars, [estimates](#) that there have been 1,568 civilian casualties from coalition bombing, mainly by the US, though it does not calculate how many of any of these are due to UK operations.

Should we take seriously the government claim that it wants to see an end to the war brokered by the UN? The government [says](#) that 'UN-led negotiations remain the best opportunity to end the conflict through political transition away from Assad to an inclusive government'. Yet UK and US policy has in practice opposed such negotiated deals. As prominent analyst Avi Shlaim has [documented](#), Western insistence that Syrian president Assad must first step down sabotaged first Kofi Annan's and then Lakhdar Brahimi UN efforts to set up a peace deal.

British policy in Syria, by stepping up support to opposition forces, is having the effect of prolonging the war while doing nothing to stop Assad's constant brutal attacks on civilians. It strongly appears as if Britain wants neither side to win or lose - it cannot now afford for Assad's Russian and Iranian backers to claim victory by keeping the regime in power, but neither does it want to see Islamic State and other jihadists, which dominate the opposition, take control of a post-Assad Syria. So Britain is playing with fire, seeing the people of region as it always has - as expendable unpeople in its geopolitical games.

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