

Watchdogs to Attack Dogs: Western Liberal Media Failures on Syria

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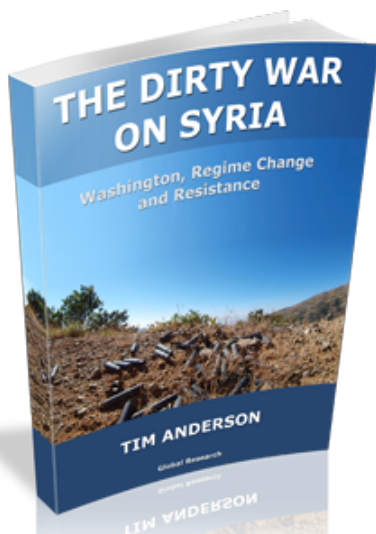
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Why did the western liberal media (WLM) engage with such passion in the US-led 'humanitarian war' against Syria? Have western journalists shown any recognition of their own moral and, at times, criminal responsibility for the consequences?

In December 2015, almost five years into the war, the BBC ran a lengthy radio program called 'Al Qaeda in Syria' in which it asked whether Britain had created 'an unspoken alliance of convenience' with jihadi groups including al Qaeda to help 'destroy the Assad regime'. It spoke of western attempts to 'rebrand al Qaeda as an organisation with which we can do business' and acknowledged that the so-called 'moderate rebels' had fought alongside al Qaeda groups for years (BBC4 2015).

To informed observers, none of this was new. It was just surprising the BBC was reporting it.



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A few weeks later the British state broadcaster reverted to form, claiming the Syrian Army's offensive against those same al Qaeda groups 'threatens' the peace talks in Geneva (BBC 2016). At the same time the UK Guardian, using jihadist-linked sources, once again falsely blamed the Syrian Army of gassing civilians (Shaheen 2016). This came in the midst of reports that the 'moderate rebels' (mainly Ahrar as Sham and Jaysh al Islam, alongside Jabhat al Nusra) were again using chemical weapons against parts of Aleppo. The British allegations, once again, deflected attention from the armed groups' crimes, boosting NATO's propaganda.

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How does the entrenched bias of these media channels reflect on the claimed purpose of the WLM, which pretends not to be a cheer squad for its government's latest war? The WLM maintains the idea of a 'watchdog' role, an independent voice that somehow assists social accountability. Yet it is precisely this liberal media that has projected the greatest enthusiasm for the recent 'humanitarian wars' on Libya and Syria. Critical faculties were switched off.

They did this by constant reliance on partisan sources, such as the UK-based Rami Abdul Rahman (the self-styled Syrian Observatory on Human Rights), the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International (USA), the latter two firmly embedded in a 'revolving door' relationship with the US State Department, at least under Democrat administrations (Alternet 2014; Wright and Rowley 2012; Anderson 2016: Ch. 7).

Amnesty International relies on data from another partisan body, the Violations Documentation Center (VDC), whose body counts have no real verification. The VDC has noted some dead ISIS fighters as 'martyrs', exposing its sympathies (Sterling 2015).

From watchdogs to attack dogs: the western liberal media on Syria	
Joined the western 'civilising missions' to overthrow governments in Libya and Syria	Pretend that sectarian fanatics are 'rebels', or 'revolutionaries' in a 'civil war'
Constant use of partisan sources, like the UK 'Syrian Observatory', 'Human Rights Watch'	Repeat false claims against Syrian Army well after those claims are disproven
Promoted 'false flag' massacres, encouraging further sectarian atrocities	At times, engage directly in cover-ups and the fabrication of evidence for war propaganda
Pretend the US and its allies do not support al Qaeda / ISIS, after multiple US admissions	Presenting extremists as 'moderates', helped aggravate and prolong the dirty war on Syria

The implications of the WLM's campaigning zeal are far worse than simply some distorted stories. To consistently misrepresent dirty wars with proxy armies as simply a 'civil war', while barracking for 'humanitarian intervention', can lead to active collaboration with war crimes.

Let's look some examples, in context.

For years there has been constant, daily repetition of claims that the Syrian Army was killing 'civilians'. On the other side, 'rebels' backed by 'activists' were said to be struggling against a tyrannical and illegitimate 'regime'. The language was always partisan, as were the sources.

Yet evidence shows very clearly that armed attacks on Syrian soldiers, cities and civilians have been led by al Qaeda groups, from the very beginning, and that western governments have known this. Regardless, the western liberal media acted as megaphones for the false stories.

For example, in May 2011, well before ISIS came to Syria, the genocidal slogan 'Christians to Beirut, Alawis to the tomb' was reported (Blanford 2011), chanted in the city of Homs by the Farouq Brigade, the largest 'Free Syrian Army' (FSA) group. At the same time Syrian Salafi leader Adnan Arour, declared 'we shall mince [the Alawites] in meat grinders and feed their flesh to the dogs' (MEMRITV 2011). All through this period the WLM was chanting 'peaceful

protestors’.

Farouq was joined in Homs by foreign jihadis from Jabhat al Nusra, their foreign al Qaeda support group, and both engaged in a series of sectarian massacres, often falsely blaming them on the Syrian Army (Anderson 2015). By early 2012 the Christian media was reporting large scale ethnic cleansing in the Homs area as ‘Al-Qaeda-linked Islamist forces seize a golden opportunity to terrorize infidels with impunity’ (Crimi 2012).

During most of this time the WLM stuck with the White House and Human Rights Watch (HRW) story that Syrian security forces had been massacring ‘unarmed protestors’, that the Syrian people ‘had no choice’ but to take up arms, with this ‘protest movement’ having been ‘overwhelmingly peaceful until September 2011’ (HRW 2011, HRW 2012). Based on that argument, NATO countries proceeded to arm the ‘peaceful protestors’.

Important contradictions emerged in the western governments’ war stories, but the WLM ignored them. The UN reported in early 2012 that there had been around 5,000 deaths, more than half of them from the military and security forces, to be specific: “478 police and 2,091 from the military and security forces” (OHCHR 2012: 2; Narwani 2014). So ‘peaceful protestors’ killed as many as ‘the regime’? How was that possible? The WLM stuck with the official story.

Even after Syrian nun Mother Agnes Mariam had denounced ‘false flag’ crimes and reported on the recycling of photos of dead bodies (SANA 2011), and after western journalist Nir Rosen (2012) reported that the Islamist ‘rebels’ were dressing up their own casualties as ‘civilians’, the WLM stuck to its jihadist-linked sources, reporting that the Syrian Army was constantly targeting ‘civilians’.

Western think tanks, too, trotted out the official war line. Backing what used to be called ‘the supreme crime’ of a war of aggression (these days ‘regime change’) became the ideological fulcrum. The WLM would not question successive justifications for war (humanitarian intervention, protective intervention), effectively blacklisting dissident commentators.

Western ‘think tanks’ fell into line. A September 2012 Quilliam Institute briefing claimed that ‘The vast majority of the opposition fighters are legitimate nationalists fighting for the country’s freedom and the establishment of a democratic state ... most members within the FSA are pious rather than Islamists and are not motivated by sectarianism’ (Benotman and Naseraldin 2012: 1). Similarly, in October 2012, the International Crisis Group, while recognising a Salafi strand in the fighters, spoke of ‘a moderate Islamic tradition’, suggesting that Farouq might be a secular group (ICG 2012: i, 6).

This was more than a year after Farouq had been blamed for the ethnic cleansing of Homs, had publicised its bombing of hospitals, had imposed an Islamic tax and had committed several massacres in the Homs area (Anderson 2016: Ch.6). As foreign jihadists poured in across the Turkish border, clearly with NATO approval, the WLM persisted, beyond all bounds of plausibility, with the ‘civil war’ and ‘moderate rebels’ story.

But the US government had better sources. Two months earlier US intelligence had reported that ‘The Salafist, the Muslim Brotherhood and AQI [al Qaeda in Iraq = ISI] are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria’. They want to create a ‘Salafist principality in eastern Syria’ and that was ‘exactly’ what NATO and the Gulf Monarchies want, ‘in order to isolate

the Syrian regime' (DIA 2012). This was well before ISIS came to Syria. Even after this cable was revealed, in 2014, the WLM did little to question the Washington line.

Created by the Bush administration in 2006 – to prevent Baghdad getting close to Tehran – and drawing on Saudi patronage, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) moved across into Syria in 2013. Despite the failure of a merger with Jabhat al Nusra, this second al Qaeda group began to collaborate with the NATO-backed FSA. In mid 2013 FSA commander Abdul Jabbar al-Okaidi (prominently photographed with the former US Ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford) joined forces with ISIS in the battle for Menagh airbase, in Aleppo Province. FSA man Al-Okaidi fought alongside ISIS leaders Abu Jandal (from Egypt) and Abu Omar al Shishani (US-trained, from Georgia) and was filmed celebrating victory with Abu Jandal (Anderson 2016: Chapter 6). Such facts were publicly available, through the jihadists' own online propaganda, but they barely made a dent in Washington's revised line: ISIS was the new evil and the western-backed 'moderate rebels' were fighting them.

False allegations against the Syrian Army blocked sympathy amongst WLMN audiences for all Syrians who were fighting to defend their country from foreign-backed terrorists. One of the first 'false flag' massacres, created to incite a Libyan-styled foreign intervention, was the terrible Houla massacre of May 2012. More than 100 mostly pro-government villagers (some of whom had participated in the recent congress elections) were killed after the Syrian Army drove jihadists out of nearby Homs city. An initial UN team led by Dutch General Robert Mood went to Houla and found conflicting stories, in the then jihadist-occupied area. A second UN team, hastily convened and co-chaired by US diplomat Karen Koning AbuSayd, tried to blame un-named pro-government 'thugs'. They could not provide any motive, and ignored evidence from 15 independent witnesses who identified four local gunmen, two clans and a large Farouq FSA group led by Abdurrazzaq Tlass and Yahya Yusuf (Anderson 2015; Anderson 2016: Ch. 8). Syria was internationally sanctioned on the basis of these fabricated claims. But dissent at the Security Council prevented UN intervention.

Syria became the site of many similar 'false flag' incidents. Some were even exposed by western journalists, such as the 2012 FSA massacre of villagers at Aqrab (Homs) and of many hostages in Daraya (south Damascus). In both cases the Army was initially blamed, but western observers (Thompson 2012; Fisk 2012) reported convincingly that the al Qaeda groups were responsible.

The Western Liberal Media's dishonesty became criminal. The BBC assisted in the cover up of the March 2013 murder of Syria's most senior Sunni scholar, Sheikh Ramadan al Bouti. The Sheikh, a strong Syrian pluralist on religious matters, had spoken out against violent sectarianism. For that he had been branded, by the Islamists and the western media, as a 'Pro-Assad Cleric' (Mourtada and Gladstone 2013). That may have helped justify his murder. Jabhat al Nusra (al Qaeda) operatives set off a bomb in a Damascus mosque where Sheikh Bouti was speaking, killing him and more than 40 others. The terror group threatened to kill him, did kill him and then, as had been their habit, tried to blame the Syrian Government.

The social media smokescreen created by the sectarian killers was repeated and amplified by BBC journalist Jim Muir, who claimed 'it was inconceivable that such a small blast could have caused the death of around 50 people, as reported by state media.' Muir pointed to video which showed that Sheikh Bouti did not die immediately. The suggestion was that the attack was faked and the Government had somehow used a fake incident to kill the 'pro-Assad' Sheikh themselves (Muir 2013). Muir's insinuation was a disgraceful lie, a criminal attempt to cover up mass murder. More than forty people died. Photos of the mosque's

blood soaked floor were widely published.

Later that year six Jabhat al Nusra terrorists were arrested and confessed on Syrian television to the murder in great detail, including how they sought a special fatwa from their sheikh to kill Muslims in a mosque. 'After Sheikh al Bouti criticised al Nusra operations in Syria we were ordered to kill him, due to a fatwa by the legislative general official of al Nusra Front', one of the group said (Syrian Alikhbaria 2013). Neither Muir nor the BBC retracted their story. By this time the British state was providing substantial material support to armed Syrian groups, including 'moderate rebels' working closely with Jabhat al Nusra (Hopkins 2014).

The western liberal media actively promoted a major chemical weapons incident staged by the sectarian groups in the East Ghouta (countryside Damascus) in August 2013. Long after an array of independent evidence disproved allegations that the Syrian Army was responsible, the WLM repeated these false claims. That incident, complete with video of drugged or dead children, did involve real chemical weapons. An unknown number were killed; 1,400 un-named victims were mentioned, but only eight bodies were reported buried (ISTEAMS 2013).

At the time of this incident, UN chemical weapons inspectors were in Syria at the invitation of the Syrian Government, to investigate the al Qaeda groups' use of sarin gas in Khan al-Asal, near Aleppo. Those same groups used the occasion to divert attention from that incident, stage another attack and blame it on the government.

Yet the government had no plausible motive. Further, studies by US experts at MIT showed the rockets to have a much shorter range than was suggested. The final report by Lloyd and Postol (2014) was fatal to the US story. It concluded that the rockets 'could not possibly have been fired at East Ghouta from the 'heart', or from the eastern edge, of the Syrian Government controlled area shown in the intelligence map published by the White House on August 30, 2013'.

US intelligence sources confirmed this. Veteran North American journalist Seymour Hersh (2013) interviewed US agents and concluded that Washington's claims on the evidence had been fabricated. He found "intense concern" and anger amongst US agents over "the deliberate manipulation of intelligence". Other reports from Syria (e.g. Gavlak and Ababneh 2013; ISTEAMS 2013) further exposed the fabrication.

The independent evidence was overwhelming and inescapable: chemical weapons had been used in East Ghouta, but the charges against the Syrian Army were fabricated. Logically this meant that the al Qaeda groups based in the East Ghouta (Jabhat al Nusra, Jaysh al Islam and Ahrar as Sham) had staged the attack, to blame the Army in an attempt to attract greater foreign military support.

Regardless of this evidence, the western media in general, and the WLM in particular, endlessly recycled the lie that the Syrian Army and the Syrian President 'gassed children' in the East Ghouta. So, for example, Anne Gearan at the Washington Post (19 June 2014) claimed repeatedly that the Syrian Government had used chemical weapons. Michael Crowley at Time magazine (26 June 2014) wrote 'President Bashar al Assad murdered civilians with nerve gas last year', while Jon Snow at the UK's Channel Four (4 September 2014) claimed 'It's only one year ago that chemical weapons were used by Syrian forces on

its own population'. Ruth Sherlock at the UK Telegraph (10 September 2014) falsely claimed that 'Bashar al Assad's regime made 'systematic' use of chemical weapons against Syrian civilians'. All these stories were false and in reckless disregard of the evidence.

The fake claims carried on for years. The UK Guardian (14 March 2016) repeated the East Ghouta claims, adding it to other alleged Syrian government 'chemical weapons attacks', citing a report by the US-based Syrian American Medical Society (Shaheen 2016). SAMS is an Ohio-based partisan group which had also made false claims about Russia bombing hospitals in the terrorist held areas; the Red Cross did not support those allegations (RT 2015). Another front group, 'Physicians for Human Rights', falsely blamed the Syria Government for bombing al Kindi hospital in Aleppo. In fact, Jabhat al Nusra published video of its destruction of this hospital, using truck bombs and crying out 'God is Great' (Anderson 2016: Chapters 7 and 11). At the time of the Guardian story the Turkish Government backed 'moderate rebels' were under fire for using chemical attacks on Kurdish areas of Aleppo (ARA News 2016). Nevertheless, Jeffrey Goldberg in The Atlantic ('The Obama Doctrine', April 2016) repeated the East Ghouta lie: 'In the Damascus suburb of Ghouta ... Assad's army had murdered more than 1,400 civilians with sarin gas'.

In context of a war where it was well known that the US President had announced a military attack would follow any Syrian use of chemical weapons, these repeated fabrications amount to propaganda for war, itself an international war crime. Whether through malice or laziness, this is an exceptionally grave crime and, were there an independent tribunal, would attract severe penalties.

Another example of active BBC collusion in fabrications was brought to light by British man Robert Stuart, who pursued the British broadcaster over a 30 September 2013 documentary titled 'Saving Syria's Children'. That story and linked news reports claimed the Syrian Army had launched an incendiary bomb attack on a school', using 'napalm' or chemical weapons. The attack was said to be on 26 August 2013 in Urm Al-Kubra, Aleppo, just days after the East Ghouta incident. The BBC made use of prominent anti-Syrian Doctor Rola Hallam. But the 'evidence' was once again fabricated.

This was not simply a case of a story being compromised by partisan sources. The video was filmed by BBC staff and associates at a hospital near the school. Stuart presents evidence to show this footage was 'largely, if not entirely, staged'. Experts examined the footage and say, effectively, that the portrayed burns victims are actors and not burns victims. Further, the audio track of Dr Hallam's claims (she wore a surgical mask) was edited and her words changed between different versions of the video. Stuart (2013; 2015) has pursued the BBC over this fabrication, posting a catalogue of evidence online.

Just before a Geneva peace conference in January 2014, the tiny petro-monarchy of Qatar, a major sponsor of armed groups in Syria, released a report it had purchased from some British lawyers. The report showed thousands of photos of dead bodies, presenting an anonymous witness 'Caesar' who claimed these were victims of mass torture and murder by the Syrian Government. After two years of mass exposure of Qatar's report, backed by US and Israeli groups, no WLM channel proved capable of pointing out one obvious fact: half the photos were of Syrian soldiers and other victims of terrorism.

The State Department linked group Human Rights Watch, which was given special access to the 'Caesar' archive, admitted that almost half the photos (24,568 of 53,275), at face value, showed: "dead army soldiers or members of the security forces" and "crime scene

photographs taken in the aftermath of attacks ... [from] several categories of incidents including the aftermath of explosions, assassinations of security officers, fires, and car bombs" (HRW 2015: 2-3). However HRW thereafter ignored all those photos and discussed the rest – those said to have died 'in government detention'. So at the outset of a report subtitled 'Mass Deaths and Torture in Syria's Detention Facilities', HRW selectively ignored 46% of photos which did not fit its theme.

It took another genuinely independent report to point out this extraordinary selectivity, and that many of the dead in the remaining 54% of photos had clearly not died in custody. There was evidence that some had died in conflict, others in hospital (after receiving treatment), while other bodies had been picked up after decomposing. Further, 'thousands' of the photos had been manipulated to obscure notations (Sterling 2016). That is, these were the records of hospital morgues during a war, with a wide variety of deaths and no single or reliable explanation of how they had died. Yet the UK law firm Carter Ruck, Human Rights Watch and much of the western media, simply and dishonestly asserted these were all or mainly deaths in government custody. The WLM showed no sign of even the most basic investigation, as suggested by its self-styled 'watchdog' role.

The BBC's December 2015 admission that Britain was in 'an unspoken alliance' with al Qaeda groups 'to destroy the Assad regime' came 18 months after senior US officials (Vice President Joe Biden, Army chief Martin Dempsey and Senate Armed Forces chair Lindsay Graham) had admitted that their regional allies the Saudis, Turkey and Qatar were funding terrorist groups including ISIS (Anderson 2016: Ch.12). Biden and Graham blamed Turkey and the Saudis for throwing arms and money at anyone who would fight Assad. Graham pointed out 'they fund [ISIS] because the Free Syrian Army couldn't fight Assad, they were trying to beat Assad' (Rothman 2014).

One full year after those senior officials admitted that their closest allies were financing ISIS, specifically to overthrow President Assad, the WLM continued to blame the Syrian President for ISIS. For example, Dominic Tierney in *The Atlantic*, whether stupidly or dishonestly, claimed 'the Syrian dictator's sinister plan ... it seems, is to deliberately aid the rise of ISIS—what I call the devil's gambit' (Tierney 2015). Undeterred, western governments and the compliant western media kept asserting the fiction that their 'moderate rebels' were being armed to fight ISIS. In fact, throughout 2014-2015, thousands of US-armed mercenaries defected to Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS, along with their US weapons (Anderson 2016: Chapter 12).

The western liberal media spectacularly failed in its self-proclaimed watchdog role and, at times, engaged directly in fabrications to assist the western governments and their al Qaeda proxy armies. They did not simply fail to investigate the 'false flag' massacres of the western-backed groups, their complicity encouraged further massacres. They ignored the exposed 'false flag' massacres (e.g. in Daraya and Aqrab) and repeated the faked claims (e.g. East Ghouta) even when multiple sources of independent evidence had destroyed those claims.

Constant repetition of lies that the Syrian Army was 'targeting civilians' and 'gassing children', emboldened the al Qaeda groups, encouraging further atrocities and making any peace settlement much more difficult. The steady stream of lies and systematic reliance on partisan sources – such as the 'Syrian Observatory of Human Rights' – has aggravated and prolonged the dirty war on Syria. The western liberal media acted not as 'watchdogs' but as 'attack dogs', compliant creatures of their governments.

A number of the references in this article are to the author's book *The Dirty War on Syria: Washington, Regime Change and Resistance*, available at Global Research, here: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-dirty-war-on-syria-washington-regime-change-and-resistance/5504372>

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