THE DIRTY WAR ON SYRIA

Washington, Regime Change and Resistance

TIM ANDERSON

Global Research
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by

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to my Syrian friends, my teachers, who helped me gain some insight into their astonishing country and culture, as well as into the conflict. I can’t mention all those who gave their time to speak to me, but I do have to thank my good friends Reme, Elham, Jasmine, Ahmed, Maram, Hanadi, Tania, Fawaz, Maher, Iyad, Samer, Mazen, Rana, Afraa and Mohammed.

I also want to acknowledge some lessons I have had from two Syrian Islamic scholars. From the late Sheikh Mohammed Said Ramadan al Bouti, I have come to appreciate the decency and humanity of many conservative religious people. After that, meeting the remarkable and charismatic Mufti Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun renewed my faith in the genuine spirituality that lies behind true religion. That is a welcome antidote to the pseudo-Muslims who sustain the current conflict. I will always remember Mufti Hassoun’s explanation of ‘Shami Islam’. Once again, thank you to all my Syrian teachers but, of course, I accept full responsibility for my own words.

Tim Anderson, Sydney, Australia, 15 January, 2015
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Although every war makes ample use of lies and deception, the dirty war on Syria has relied on a level of mass disinformation not seen in living memory. The British-Australian journalist Philip Knightley pointed out that war propaganda typically involves ‘a depressingly predictable pattern’ of demonising the enemy leader, then demonising the enemy people through atrocity stories, real or imagined (Knightley 2001). Accordingly, a mild-mannered eye doctor called Bashar al Assad became the “new evil” in the world and, according to consistent western media reports, the Syrian Army did nothing but kill civilians for more than four years. To this day, many imagine the Syrian conflict is a ‘civil war’, a ‘popular revolt’ or some sort of internal sectarian conflict. These myths are, in many respects, a substantial achievement for the big powers which have driven a series of ‘regime change’ operations in the Middle East region, all on false pretexts, over the past fifteen years.

This book is a careful academic work, but also a strong defence of the right of the Syrian people to determine their own society and political system. That position is consistent with international law and human rights principles, but may irritate western sensibilities, accustomed as we are to an assumed prerogative to intervene. At times I have to be blunt, to cut through the double-speak. In Syria the big powers have sought to hide their hand, using proxy armies while demonising the Syrian Government and Army, accusing them of constant atrocities; then pretending to rescue the Syrian people from their own government. Far fewer western people opposed the war on Syria than opposed the invasion of Iraq, because they were deceived about its true nature.

In 2011 I had only a basic understanding of Syria and its history. However, I was deeply suspicious when reading of the violence that erupted in the southern border town of Daraa. I knew that such violence (sniping at police and civilians, the use of semi-automatic weapons) does not spring spontaneously from street demonstrations. And I was deeply suspicious of the big powers. All my life I had been told lies about the pretexts for war. I decided to research the Syrian conflict, reading hundreds of books and articles, watching many videos and speaking to as many Syrians as I could. I wrote dozens of articles and visited Syria twice, during the conflict. This book is a result of that research.

Dirty wars are not new. Cuban national hero Jose Martí predicted to a friend that Washington would try to intervene in Cuba’s independence struggle against the Spanish.

They want to provoke a war’, he wrote in 1889 ‘to have a pretext to intervene and, with the authority of being mediator and guarantor, to seize the country … There is no more cowardly thing in the annals of free people; nor such cold blooded evil. (Martí 1975: 53).

Nine years later, during the third independence war, an explosion in Havana Harbour destroyed the USS Maine, killing 258 US sailors and serving as a pretext for a US invasion. The subsequent ‘Spanish-American’ war snatched victory from the Cubans and allowed the US to take control of the remaining Spanish colonial territories. Cuba had territory annexed
and a deeply compromised constitution was imposed. No evidence ever proved the Spanish were responsible for the bombing of the Maine and many Cubans believe the U.S bombed their own ship. The monument in Havana, in memory of those sailors, still bears this inscription: 'To the victims of the Maine who were sacrificed to imperialist voracity and the desire to gain control of the island of Cuba' (Richter 1998).

The US launched dozens of interventions in Latin America over the subsequent century. A notable dirty war was led by CIA-backed, ‘freedom fighter’ mercenaries based in Honduras, who attacked the Sandinista Government and the people of Nicaragua in the 1980s. That conflict, in its modus operandi, was not so different to the war on Syria. In Nicaragua more than 30,000 people were killed. The International Court of Justice found the US guilty of a range of terrorist-style attacks on the little Central American country, and found that the US owed Nicaragua compensation (ICJ 1986). Washington ignored these rulings.

With the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011 the big powers took advantage of a political foment by seizing the initiative to impose an ‘Islamist Winter’, attacking the few remaining independent states of the region. Very quickly we saw the destruction of Libya, a small country with the highest standard of living in Africa. NATO bombing and a Special Forces campaign helped the al Qaeda groups on the ground. The basis for NATO’s intervention was lies told about actual and impending massacres, supposedly carried out or planned by the government of Muammar Gaddafi. These claims led rapidly to a UN Security Council resolution said to protect civilians through a ‘no fly zone’. We know now that trust was betrayed, and that the NATO powers abused the limited UN authorisation to overthrow the Libyan Government (McKinney 2012).

Subsequently, no evidence emerged to prove that Gaddafi intended, carried out or threatened wholesale massacres, as was widely suggested (Forte 2012). Genevieve Garrigos of Amnesty International (France) admitted there was ‘no evidence’ to back her group’s earlier claims that Gaddafi had used ‘black mercenaries’ to commit massacres (Forte 2012; Edwards 2013). Alan Kuperman, drawing mainly on North American sources, demonstrates the following points. First, Gaddafi’s crackdown on the insurrection in eastern Libya was ‘much less lethal’ than had been suggested. Indeed there was evidence that he had ‘refrained from indiscriminate violence’.

The Islamists were themselves armed from the beginning. From later US estimates, of the almost one thousand casualties in the first seven weeks, about three percent were women and children (Kuperman 2015). Second, when government forces were about to regain the east of the country, NATO intervened, claiming this was to avert an impending massacre. Ten thousand people died after the NATO intervention, compared to one thousand before. Gaddafi had pledged no reprisals in Benghazi and ‘no evidence or reason’ came out to support the claim that he planned mass killings (Kuperman 2015). The damage was done. NATO handed over the country to squabbling groups of Islamists and western aligned ‘liberals’. A relatively independent state was overthrown, but Libya was destroyed. Four years on there is no functioning government and violence persists; and that war of aggression against Libya went unpunished.

Two days before NATO bombed Libya another armed Islamist insurrection broke out in Daraa, Syria’s southernmost city. Yet because this insurrection was linked to the demonstrations of a political reform movement, its nature was disguised. Many did not see that those who were providing the guns – Qatar and Saudi Arabia – were also running fake news stories in their respective media channels, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. There were other rea-
sons for the durable myths of this war. Many western audiences, liberals and leftists as well as the more conservative, seemed to like the idea of their own role as the saviours of a foreign people, speaking out strongly about a country of which they knew little, but joining what seemed to be a ‘good fight’ against this new ‘dictator’. With a mission and their proud self-image western audiences apparently forgot the lies of previous wars, and of their own colonial legacies.

I would go so far as to say that, in waging the Dirty War on Syria, western culture in general abandoned its better traditions: of reason, the maintenance of ethical principle and the search for independent evidence at times of conflict; in favour of its worst traditions: the ‘imperial prerogative’ for intervention, backed by deep racial prejudice and poor reflection on the histories of their own cultures. That weakness was reinforced by a ferocious campaign of war propaganda. After the demonisation of Syrian leader Bashar al Assad began, a virtual information blockade was constructed against anything which might undermine the wartime storyline. Very few sensible western perspectives on Syria emerged after 2011, as critical voices were effectively blacklisted.

In that context I came to write this book. It is a defence of Syria. This is a resource book and a contribution to the history of the Syrian conflict. The western stories have become self-indulgent and I believe it is wasteful to indulge them too much. Best, I think, to speak of current events as they are, then address the smokescreens later. I do not ignore the western myths, in fact this book documents many of them. But I lead with the reality of the war.

Western mythology relies on the idea of imperial prerogatives, asking what must ‘we’ do about the problems of another people; an approach which has no basis in international law or human rights. The next steps involve a series of fabrications about the pretexts, character and events of the war. The first pretext over Syria was that the NATO states and the Gulf monarchies were supporting a secular and democratic revolution. When that seemed implausible the second story was that they were saving the oppressed majority ‘Sunni Muslim’ population from a sectarian ‘Alawite regime’. Then, when sectarian atrocities by anti-government forces attracted greater public attention, the pretext became a claim that there was a shadow war: ‘moderate rebels’ were said to be actually fighting the extremist groups. Western intervention was therefore needed to bolster these ‘moderate rebels’ against the ‘new’ extremist group that had mysteriously arisen and posed a threat to the world.

That was the ‘B’ story. No doubt Hollywood will make movies based on this meta-script, for years to come. However this book leads with the ‘A’ story. Proxy armies of Islamists, armed by US regional allies (mainly Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey), infiltrate a political reform movement and snipe at police and civilians. They blame this on the government and spark an insurrection, seeking the overthrow of the Syrian government and its secular-pluralist state. This follows the openly declared ambition of the US to create a ‘New Middle East’, subordinating every country of the region, by reform, unilateral disarmament or direct overthrow. Syria was next in line, after Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. In Syria, the proxy armies would come from the combined forces of the Muslim Brotherhood operating out of Turkey and Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabi fanatics. Despite occasional power struggles between these groups and their sponsors, they share much the same Salafist ideology, opposing secular or nationalist regimes and seeking the establishment of a religious state.

However in Syria Washington’s Islamists confronted a disciplined national army which did not disintegrate along religious lines, despite many provocations. The Syrian state also had
strong allies in Russia and Iran. Syria was not to be Libya Take Two. In this prolonged war the violence, from the western side, was said to consist of the Syrian Army targeting and killing civilians. From the Syrian side people saw daily terrorist attacks on towns and cities, schools and hospitals and massacres of ordinary people by NATO’s ‘freedom fighters’, then the counter attacks by the Army. Foreign terrorists were recruited in dozens of countries by the Saudis and Qatar, bolstering the local mercenaries.

Though the terrorist groups were often called ‘opposition, ‘militants’ and ‘Sunni groups’ outside Syria, inside the country the actual political opposition abandoned the Islamists back in early 2011. Protest was driven off the streets by the violence, and most of the opposition (minus the Muslim Brotherhood and some exiles) sided with the state and the Army, if not with the ruling Ba’ath Party. The Syrian Army has been brutal with terrorists but, contrary to western propaganda, protective of civilians. The Islamists have been brutal with all, and openly so. Millions of internally displaced people have sought refuge with the Government and Army, while others fled the country.

In a hoped-for ‘end game’ the big powers sought overthrow of the Syrian state or, failing that, the creation of a dysfunctional state or dismembering into sectarian statelets, thus breaking the axis of independent regional states. That axis comprises Hezbollah in south Lebanon and the Palestinian resistance, alongside Syria and Iran, the only states in the region without US military bases. More recently Iraq – still traumatised from western invasion, massacres and occupation – has begun to align itself with this axis. Russia too has begun to play an important counter-weight role. Recent history and conduct demonstrate that neither Russia nor Iran harbour any imperial ambitions remotely approaching those of Washington and its allies, several of which (Britain, France and Turkey) were former colonial warlords in the region. From the point of view of the ‘Axis of Resistance’, defeat of the dirty war on Syria means that the region can begin closing ranks against the big powers. Syria’s successful resistance would mean the beginning of the end for Washington’s ‘New Middle East’.

That is basically the big picture. This book sets out to document the A story and expose the B story. It does so by rescuing some of the better western traditions: the use of reason, the maintenance of ethical principle and the search for independent evidence in case of conflict. I hope it might prove a useful resource.
Here is a brief overview of the chapters

Chapter 1, ‘Syria and Washington’s ‘New Middle East’” puts Syria in context of the US plans for a ‘New Middle East’, the latest chapter in a longer history of US attempts to dominate the region.

Chapter 2, ‘Barrel Bombs, Partisan Sources and War Propaganda’ addresses the problem of reporting and reading the Syrian crisis. Media channels have shown a hyper-reliance on partisan sources, committed to the war and denigrating the Syrian Army. This is the key barrier to understanding the controversies around chemical weapons, civilian massacres and the levels of support for or opposition to President Assad.

Chapter 3, ‘Darraa 2011: Another Islamist Insurrection’ reconstructs, from a range of sources, the Saudi-backed Islamist insurrection in Darraa in March 2011. Those armed attacks were quite distinct from the political reform rallies, which the Islamists soon drove off the streets.

Chapter 4, ‘Bashar al Assad and Political Reform’ explains the political reform movement from the time Bashar assumed the presidency in the year 2000 to the beginning of the crisis in 2011. From this we can see that most opposition groups were committed to reform within a Syrian context, with virtually all opposing attacks on the Syrian state. The chapter then reviews the role of Bashar as a reformer, and the evidence on his popularity.

Chapter 5, ‘The Empire’s Jihadis’ looks at the collaboration between Salafist political Islam and the imperial powers in the Middle East. Distinct from the anti-imperial Islamic currents in Iran and south Lebanon, Salafist political Islam has become a sectarian force competing with Arab nationalism across Egypt, Palestine and Syria, and drawing on long standing collaborative relations with the big powers. This history provides important background to the character of Syria’s Islamist ‘revolution’, and its various slogans.

Chapter 6, ‘Embedded Media, Embedded Watchdogs’ identifies the propaganda techniques of media channels and the network of ‘human rights’ bodies (Human Rights Watch, Avaaz, etc) which function as megaphones and ‘moderators’ for the Washington agenda. Many have become fierce advocates for ‘humanitarian war’. A number of newer western NGOs (e.g. The Syria Campaign, The White Helmets) have been created by Wall Street agencies specifically for the dirty war on Syria. A number of their fabrications are documented here.

Chapter 7, ‘The Houla Massacre Revisited’ considers in detail the evidence from the first major massacre designed (following success of the technique over Libya) to influence UN Security Council consideration of military intervention. While the first UN inquiry group, actually in Syria, found contradictory evidence on this massacre, a second UN group outside Syria and co-chaired by a US diplomat, tried to blame the Syrian Government. Yet more than a dozen witnesses blamed Farouq FSA Islamists, who killed pro-government villagers and took over the area, holding it for some months. Several other ‘false flag’ massacres are noted.

Chapter 8, ‘Chemical Fabrications: the East Ghouta Incident’ details the second major ‘false flag’ incident of international significance. This incident in August 2013, which nearly sparked a major escalation involving US missile attacks on Syria, was used to accuse the Syrian Government of killing hundreds of civilians, including children, with chemical weapons. Within a fairly short time multiple sources of independent evidence (including North American evidence) disproved these accusations. Nevertheless, Syria’s opponents have repeated the false accusations, to this day, as though they were fact.
Chapter 9, ‘A Responsibility to Protect and the Double Game’ addresses a recent political doctrine, a subset of ‘humanitarian intervention’ popularised to add to the imperial toolkit. The application of this doctrine in Libya was disastrous for that little country. Fortunately the attempts to use it in Syria failed.

Chapter 10, ‘Health and Sanctions’ documents the NATO-backed Islamist attacks on Syria’s health system, linked to the impact of western economic sanctions. These twin currents have caused great damage to Syrian public health. Such attacks carry no plausible motive of seeking local popular support, so we must interpret them as part of an overall strategy to degrade the Syrian state, rendering it more vulnerable to outside intervention.

Chapter 11 ‘Washington, Terrorism and ISIS: the evidence’, documents the links between the big powers and the latest peak terrorist group they claim to be fighting. Only evidence can help develop informed opinion on this contentious matter, but the evidence is overwhelming. There is little ideological difference between the various Salafi-Islamist groups, and Washington and its allies have financed and armed every one of them.

Chapter 12, ‘Western Intervention and the Colonial Mind’ discusses the western cultural mindset that underlies persistent violations of the rights of other peoples.

Chapter 13 ‘Towards an Independent Middle East’, considers the end-game in the Syrian crisis, and its implications for the Middle East region. At tremendous cost the Syrian Arab Republic, its army and its people, have successfully resisted aggression from a variety of powerful enemies. Syria’s survival is due to its resilience and internal unity, bolstered by support from some strong allies. The introduction of Russian air power in late September 2015 was important. So too were the coordinated ground forces from Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, in support of an independent Syria.

When the attacks on Syria abate the Middle East seems set to be transformed, with greater political will and military preparedness on the part of an expanded Axis of Resistance. That will signal the beginning of the end for Washington’s 15 year spree of bloodshed and ‘regime change’ across the entire region.

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After the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the destruction of Libya, Syria was to be the next state overthrown. Washington and its regional allies had planned this for some time. After ‘regime change’ in Damascus, Syria’s ally Hezbollah, leader of the Lebanese Resistance to Israel, would be isolated. The Islamic Republic of Iran would remain the only Middle East country without US military bases. After Iran, Washington would control the entire region, excluding possible competitors such as Russia and China. Palestine would be lost.

This was all part of Washington’s plan for a ‘New Middle East’; but it was not to be. Determined and coordinated resistance can never be discounted. Syria’s national army has resisted wave after wave of fanatical Islamist attacks, backed by NATO and the Gulf monarchies, and Russian and Iranian support remained solid.

Importantly, Syria has built new forms of cooperation with a weak but emerging Iraq. Washington had worked for decades to divide Iran and Iraq, so the strengthening ties between Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine represent a regional challenge to the new ‘Great Game’ of our times. The Middle East is not just a big power playground.

The US and its close regional collaborators (Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, Qatar and Jordan), we now know, have been behind every anti-Syrian extremist group since the beginning of the recent conflict. They have used the worst of reactionary and sectarian forces to pursue their ends. The “Axis of Resistance”, on the other hand, should not be misunderstood as a sectarian phenomenon.

This group – the Islamic Republic of Iran, secular Syria, the Lebanese Resistance led by Hezbollah and the Palestinians – is deeply anti-imperial. Syria, the only remaining ‘secular’ state in the region has long allied itself with the Islamic Republic of Iran, including against Saddam Hussein’s secular Iraq. Saddam in turn was used by Washington to degrade Iran, after that country’s 1979 revolution. On the other hand, Iran never backed the sectarian Muslim Brotherhood in any of its insurrections against Syria.

Iran does support Hezbollah, but it is most demonized for arming Palestine. This plurality disproves any claims that the Axis of Resistance is sectarian. Promotion of sectarianism in the Middle East mostly comes from Washington’s key allies, Saudi Arabia, the other Gulf monarchies, and the ethnic cleansers of Israel. They share the US aim of keeping the region weak and divided.
How did Syria come to be targeted?

We can chart the hostility back to Syria’s central role in the Arab-Israeli wars, especially those of 1967 and 1973, a common regional struggle against the expansionist Zionist state. After that, Syria’s support for the 1979 Iranian Revolution put it offside with Washington. As far back as 1980, under the Carter administration, Washington was searching for a ‘change of regime’ in Damascus. A cable from the National Security Council to Secretary of State Zbigniew Brzezinski urged a coordinated study, including with their European and Arab monarchy partners, of ‘identifying possible alternative regimes’ to the Government led by Hafez al Assad. They were considering how to ‘reduce the problems of ill-considered reaction [by Syria’s ally, the Soviet Union] to a change of regime in Damascus’. The memorandum also recognised that any withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon (Syria had entered Lebanon to stop the civil war, in 1975; it would stay until 2005) would run a ‘high’ risk of renewed civil war in that country and create ‘high incentives for Israeli military engagement in southern Lebanon’ (NSC 1980).

It was thus no coincidence that the Muslim Brotherhood, – always the most organised Syrian opposition group, and whose history of collaboration with outside powers dated back to the 1940s – began a series of bloody sectarian attacks from this point onwards, until their last insurrection was crushed in Hama in 1982. That insurrection had been backed by US allies Saudi Arabia, Saddam Hussein and Jordan (Seale 1988: 336-337). US intelligence at the time observed that ‘the Syrians are pragmatists who do not want a Muslim Brotherhood government’ (DIA 1982: vii). US analysts, soon after, used the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood at Hama to demonstrate ‘the true establishment of Syria as a totalitarian state’ (Wikas 2007: vii). This was a useful fiction.

The next strategic shift against Syria came after the September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, and the decision of Bush Junior to declare a ‘war on terror’. Although various pretexts were made for the interventions which followed, an overall plan for the Middle East was very rapidly set in train. Former senior US General Wesley Clark said in his memoirs that, two weeks after the September 2001 attacks, he was told by a ‘senior general’ at the Pentagon that the attack on Iraq (which came 18 months later) was already decided. Six weeks later he says that same general told him,

It’s worse than that’, before indicating a memo ‘from the Office of the Secretary of Defence ... [saying] we’re going to take out seven countries in five years’. That list began with Iraq and Syria and ended with Iran (Clark 2007).

Iraq’s ruler Saddam Hussein had been an enemy of Syria, through his opportunistic backing of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and for his collaboration with the US in the long and bloody war against Iran. However the Syrian Government, led by Hafez al Assad, had supported the expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait in what has been called the First Gulf War (1990-1991). That war, whatever one thought of Kuwait’s monarchy, was a clear breach of the UN doctrine of collective security and, on that basis, attracted a UN Security Council mandate to intervene. However both Syria and Iran opposed the later invasion of Iraq (2003), even though it would depose their mutual enemy Saddam. The invasion of Iraq was clearly illegal and a war of aggression.

It was the unintended consequences of the invasion and occupation of Iraq that led to a shift in US policy, a move which was called a ‘redirection’ (Hersh 2007). Once Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist administration had been deposed, a newly installed government in Baghdad began a shift towards friendlier relations with Iran. However with Iran’s enemy Saddam out of the way, matters of genuine common concern could be discussed in a more
normal climate of neighbourly relations. Yet the idea of good neighbourly relations between Iraq and Iran seriously worried Washington. They had not fuelled the Iraq-Iran war, nor invaded Iraq, to help bring about that outcome.

As early as 2005 US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice began to speak of spreading ‘creative chaos’ in the region, to advance President Bush’s plan for a New Middle East (Karon 2006). Drawing on the traditions of the great powers, Washington set up a new ‘divide and rule’ strategy. White House insiders called Bush’s new policy ‘the redirection’, involving a more open confrontation with Iran and attempting to drive:

...[A] sectarian divide between Shiite and Sunni Muslims ...[Yet] to the distress of the White House, Iran has forged a close relationship with the Shiite dominated government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Malaki’ (Hersh 2007). Rice told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee she saw ‘a new strategic alignment’ in the region, with ‘Sunni states’ [the Gulf monarchies] as the centres of moderation and Iran, Syria and Hezbollah ‘on the other side of that divide (Hersh 2007).

The idea was to play on community divisions to create conflict, particularly in Iraq. US Central Command’s ‘Red Team’ exercises began in 2006, with military planning focused on divisions which they characterised as ‘Arabs versus Persians’ (Iranians), later asking themselves whether ‘Sunni-Shia [might be] a more appropriate framework?’ Their key assumption was that ‘there does not appear to be a scenario where Arabs and Persians will join forces against the US/West’ (Narwani 2011). The cutting edge of the operation would be the creation of al Qaeda in Iraq (IQI), funded by the Saudis and carrying out sectarian attacks on mosques and other community centres, to inflame community tensions. Senior western officials have acknowledged privately that the various billionaires of Saudi Arabia (along with the other Gulf monarchies) constitute ‘the most significant source of funding to Sunni [sic] terrorist groups worldwide’ (Jones 2014).

Although al Qaeda in Iraq, a.k.a. the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), at first claimed to be overwhelmingly Iraqi (Felter and Fishman 2008: 3), Saudi finance and recruiting significantly internationalised it. Records captured by the US military in October 2007 at Sinjar, on the Iraqi-Syrian border underline this. Those records referred to a group of about 500, half of whom were Saudi, then North African (Libyan, Algerian, Tunisian, Moroccan) and then others. Other estimates between 2005 and 2007 suggested greater or lesser degrees of various nationalities, with the largest group (40-55%) being Saudis (Felter and Fishman 2008: 8, 30-31).

A notorious example of the strategy to provoke sectarian conflict was the February 2006 bombing of the al Askari mosque in Samarra, in southern Iraq, which killed over a thousand people. Despite calls for restraint by Shia leaders in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon, there were sectarian reprisals. When arrests were made this act was said to have been carried out by an al Qaeda seven-man cell, led by an Iraqi with a Tunisian, four Saudis and two other Iraqis (Ridolfo 2007). Although al Qaeda was implicated from the start, US media and analyst focus shifted to what they called ‘Iraq’s sectarian divide’ (Worth 2006). Yet while Saddam Hussein had backed the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, he did not allow al Qaeda groups in Iraq. That was a more recent development, and not just an ‘organic’ reaction to the US occupation. Western sources sometimes acknowledge that much of the finance and the fighters for Al Qaeda have come from Saudi Arabia (Bruno 2007). However they also cloud the issue with claims that Iran and Hezbollah have, from time to time, supported al Qaeda (Kaplan 2006). Such claims are quite false.

Israel was deeply embedded with the New Middle East plan and in July-August 2006, after getting the ‘green light’ from Washington (Hersh 2006), seized on a pretext to invade
southern Lebanon. The broader aim was to degrade and disarm Hezbollah. However after almost 1200 Lebanese and 165 Israelis had been killed, a UN ceasefire was brokered. Israel had failed in all its objectives. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called this tragedy, at a time when 400 had died and half a million were displaced, simply the ‘birth pangs of a New Middle East’ (Karon 2006). That statement prompted Rami Khouri of Beirut’s Daily Star to write:

Washington is engaged almost exclusively with Arab governments [the Gulf monarchies] whose influence with Syria is virtually nonexistent, whose credibility with Arab public opinion is zero, whose own legitimacy at home is increasingly challenged, and whose pro-US policies tend to promote the growth of those [extremist] Islamist movements. (Khouri 2006).

During the destabilisation of post-Saddam Iraq, Syria was on Washington’s ‘back-burner’, but hardly forgotten. From cables released by Wikileaks we know that the US Embassy in Syria was concerned that, despite the sanctions imposed in 2005 for Syria’s non-cooperation over Iraq, Syria had ended 2006 ‘in a much stronger position domestically and internationally than it did in 2006’. Washington had tried to accuse Damascus of harbouring Iraqi resistance fighters (Syria had taken in well over a million refugees from Iraq, after the US invasion in 2003) but the US Embassy privately acknowledged that ‘extremist elements increasingly use Syria as a base, while the SARG [Syrian Arab Republic Government] has taken some actions against groups stating links to Al-Qaeda’. Nevertheless the Embassy suggested the State Department look for opportunities to ‘disrupt [Syrian President Bashar al Assad’s] decision making, keep him off-balance and make him pay a premium for his mistakes’ (US Embassy Damascus 2006).

Meantime the groundwork was being laid for intervention. The US State Department had allocated $5 million for ‘Syrian governance and reform programs’ in early 2006 (Wikas 2007: viii). The Bush administration was funding media channels and NGOs. US cables confirm that the US State Department had funded the London-based Barada Television and a network of Syrian exiles called the ‘Movement for Justice and Development’ (Whitlock 2011). This was a special program set up in parallel with similar work done more widely through the State Department funded National Endowment for Democracy.

This funding came through intermediary groups in the US, in particular the Democracy Council, which in turn received grants from the Middle East Partnership Initiative. Cables from the US Embassy in Damascus from 2009 onwards say the Democracy Council received $6.3 million to run a Syria program called ‘Civil Society Strengthening Initiative’, which included ‘various broadcast concepts’ including Barada TV. A higher figure of about $12 million between 2005 and 2010 was later noted, with the US Embassy in Damascus telling the State Department that the Syrian Government ‘would undoubtedly view any U.S. funds going to illegal political groups as tantamount to supporting regime change’. They were concerned that Syrian intelligence was hot on the trail of these programs (Whitlock 2011).

Although the Bush administration imposed a series of sanctions on Syria, between 2003 and 2008, supposedly linked to its role in Lebanon and Iraq, there were also high level diplomatic contacts with the Syrian Government. Often US policy seemed incoherent, but hostility was not far below the surface. The US demanded liberalisation of Syria’s economic policy, but blocked its attempt to join the World Trade Organization (Sadat and Jones 2009). William Rugh, former US Ambassador to the UAE, characterised US policy towards Syria as one of ‘isolation and monologue’, while ex-CIA analyst Martha Kessler says the entire policy had to be based on ‘the context of a belief among many in this [US] administration that this regime [the Syrian Government] has to go’ (Sadat and Jones 2009).
That ambition included military preparation, but not just conventional military preparation. The British were on board. Former French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas said, two years before the violence erupted in Syria: ‘I met with top British officials who confessed to me that they were preparing something on Syria … Britain was organising an invasion of rebels into Syria. They even asked me, although I was no longer Minister of Foreign Affairs, if I would like to participate.’ He says he refused (Lehman 2013). Just what detail there was to this 2009 plan is not clear.

Nevertheless, the US had long experience in dirty, covert wars, fought through proxies, in Central America (e.g. El Salvador and Nicaragua), in Africa (e.g. Zaire and Angola) and in the Middle East (e.g. Afghanistan). After President Bush declared his ‘War On Terrorism’ in 2001, the US Army manual on ‘unconventional warfare’ (UW) was revised several times to take account of the range of activities the US needed to pursue its ambitious plans. The 2008 version of this manual quotes with approval the ancient Chinese scholar of war, Sun Tzu: ‘defeating the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill’ (US Army 2008: 1.1).

That is, it is both efficient and effective to develop a range of means, short of direct military confrontation. The manual envisages ‘unconventional war’ which ‘must be conducted by, with or through surrogates’, citing the earlier examples of this in Nicaragua and Afghanistan. The manual emphasises, the ‘clearly stated purpose of UW [is] to support insurgencies, resistance movements and conventional military operations’ (US Army 2008: 1.1-1.2).

That unconventional war is precisely what was in preparation for Syria, before the events of late 2010 and early 2011 in Egypt and Tunisia, which came to be known as the Arab Spring. The model would be an extension of al Qaeda (or the Islamic State) in Iraq, drawing on Syrian Muslim Brotherhood networks and the ever faithful, sectarian and vicious Saudis.

Had Syria been isolated, like Iraq and Libya, this plan might have been more straightforward. But the NATO and Gulf Arab proxy armies would face an Axis of Resistance, with some powerful allies and with experience of sectarian provocations.

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War propaganda often demands the abandoning of ordinary reason and principle, and the Dirty War on Syria demonstrates this in abundance. A steady stream of atrocity stories – ‘barrel bombs’, chemical weapons, ‘industrial scale’ killings, dead babies – permeate the western news on Syria. These stories all have two things in common: they paint the Syrian President and the Syrian Army as monsters slaughtering civilians, including children; yet, when tracked back, all the stories come from utterly partisan sources. We are being deceived.

Normal ethical notions of avoiding conflicts of interest, searching for independent evidence and disqualifying self-serving claims from belligerent parties have been ignored in much of the western debate. This toxic atmosphere invites further fabrications, repeated to credulous audiences, even when the lies used to justify previous invasions (e.g. of Iraq in 2003) and dirty wars (e.g. in Libya, 2011) are still relatively fresh in our minds. As in previous wars, the aim is to demonise the enemy, by use of repeated atrocity claims, and so mobilise popular support behind the war (Knightley 2001).

Yet in circumstances of war adherence to some key principles is necessary when reading contentious evidence; at least if we wish to understand the truth of the matter. A belligerent party always has a vital interest in discrediting and delegitimising its opponent. For that reason, we must always view belligerent party ‘evidence’ against an opponent with grave suspicion. It is not that a warring party is incapable of understanding its opponent, rather what they say will always be conditioned by their special interest. We must assume bias. If there is no way to check the origin of that evidence, and if it is partisan and ‘self-serving’, it should be rejected as forensically worthless. This exclusion of ‘self-serving’ evidence follows broad principles applied in civil and criminal law. Such evidence only has value when it goes against the interest of the warring party, as with admissions, or when it says something about the mentality of the party putting it forward.

These principles apply whether speaking of the nature of wartime violence, or of legitimacy matters such as public opinion and political allegiance. So, for example, when ‘Islamist armed groups’ and their associates claim that their mortal enemy the Syrian Arab Army is slaughtering civilians (e.g. AP 2015), that claim by itself is next to meaningless. We expect armed opponents to attack each other, with words as well as weapons. False stories of Government atrocities were in play from the beginning of the conflict. The head of a monastery in Homs, Mother Agnes-Mariam, denounced ‘false
flag’ crimes by ‘Free Syrian Army’ groups back in 2011, where the images of murder vic-
tims were recycled in media setups by sectarian Islamists (SANA 2011). Similarly, US jour-
nalist Nir Rosen wrote of ‘dead opposition fighters ... described as innocent civilians killed
by security forces’ (Rosen 2012).

What is the lesson here? Beware of partisan atrocity stories. They might at best serve
as a flag, an accusation which might set in train a search for independent evidence; but
they are more often a distraction from present reality.

For the same reason, when the Qatari monarchy (which has invested billions of dollars in
the armed attacks on Syria) presents an anonymous, paid witness ‘Caesar’, with photos of
numerous dead and tortured bodies, blaming the Syrian Army for ‘industrial scale killing’
(O’Toole 2014; Jalabi 2015), it should be plain that this ‘evidence’ is partisan and unreli-
able (Smith-Spark 2014; MMM 2014). The fact that this story was presented by a belliger-
ent party just before a Geneva peace conference should give further cause for suspicion.
But without genuinely independent evidence to corroborate the witness we have no way of
verifying in which year, circumstance or even which country the photos were taken. Those
who finance and arm the sectarian groups have slaughtered hundreds of thousands in
recent years, in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. There is no shortage of photos of
dead bodies. The fact that western media sources run these accusations, using lawyers
(also paid by Qatar) to provide ‘bootstrap’ support (Cartalucci 2014; Murphy 2014), mere-
ly shows their limited understanding of independent evidence.

Similar principles apply to claims over legitimacy. Assertions by US Government officials,
openly and illegally pursuing ‘regime change’ in Syria, that President Assad has ‘lost all
legitimacy’ (e.g. Hilary Clinton in Al Jazeera 2011) should be seen as simply self-serving,
partisan propaganda. In the case of Washington’s claims about the August 2013 chemical
weapons attack in East Ghouta, the US Government and some of its embedded agencies
attempted to use telemetry and some other circumstantial evidence to implicate the Syrian
Army (Gladstone and Chivers 2013; HRW 2013). However, after those claims were
destroyed by a range of independent evidence (Lloyd and Postol 2014; Hersh 2014;
Anderson 2015), Washington and its media periphery simply kept repeating the same dis-
credited accusations. In the climate of war, very few in the western media were bold
enough to say that ‘the emperor has no clothes’.

We might pay a little more attention when evidence from belligerent parties goes against
their own interest. For example, in 2012 western media interviewed three Free Syrian Army
(FSA) commanders in Aleppo. They all admitted they were hated by the local people and
that the Syrian President had the loyalty of most. One said President Assad had about ‘70
percent’ support (Bayoumy 2013) in that mainly Sunni Muslim city. A second said the local
people, ‘all of them, are loyal to the criminal Bashar, they inform on us’ (Abouzeid 2012).
A third said they are ‘all informers ... they hate us. They blame us for the destruction’
(Abdul-Ahad 2012). Although this is simply anecdotal evidence, because it runs against
the interests of its sources it has greater significance than self-serving claims. Similarly,
while NATO heads of government were claiming President Assad had ‘lost all legitimacy’, an
internal NATO report estimated that 70% of Syrians supported the President, 20% were
neutral and 10% supported the ‘rebels’ (World Tribune 2013; BIN 2013). While there is no
public detail of the method behind this estimate, it has some significance in that it also runs
against self-interest. It also roughly matches the outcome of the June 2014 Presidential
elections, where Bashar al Assad gained 65% support from all eligible voters, that is,
88.7% of the vote from a 73.4% participation rate (Idea International 2015).
Perhaps the most common, systematic error of the western media, reporting on the Syrian crisis, has been the extraordinary reliance on a single person, a man based in Britain who calls himself the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR). Many of the stories about Syrian body counts, ‘regime’ atrocities and huge collateral damage come from this man. Yet Rami Abdul Rahman has always flown the flag of the Muslim Brotherhood led ‘Free Syrian Army’ on his website (SOHR 2015). He claims to collect information from a network of associates in and around Syria. It is logical to assume these would also be mostly anti-Government people.

Media channels which choose to rely on such an openly partisan source undermine their own credibility. Perhaps they don’t care? The fact that western governments, in this conflict, generally support the Muslim Brotherhood line on Syria may make them less concerned. Western media regularly presents the SOHR stories, often with impressive-sounding casualty numbers, as though they were fact (e.g. AP 2015; Pollard 2015). A ‘regime’ denial may be added at paragraph 7 or 8, to give the impression of balanced journalism. Abdul Rahman’s occasional criticism of rival Salafist groups (such as DAESH-ISIL) perhaps adds a semblance of credibility. In any case, the unthinking adoption of these partisan reports has been important in keeping alive the western myth that the Syrian Army does little more than target and kill civilians.

Much the same problem can be seen in the 2014-2015 campaign over ‘barrel bombs’, where it has been said that a particular type of Syrian Air Force bomb, which includes fuel and shrapnel, has been responsible for massive civilian casualties. Robert Parry (2015) makes the point that any sort of improvised bomb ‘dropped from helicopters’ would most likely be far less indiscriminate than most missile attacks, not to speak of the depleted uranium, napalm, white phosphorous and cluster munitions regularly used by Washington. However the point here is not to do with the technology, it is simply a new way to generate horror and backing for the war, by claiming that the Syrian Army only ever kills civilians. The supposedly ‘indiscriminate’ nature of this ‘new’ weapon is merely suggested by repetition of the slogan.

The great majority of sites of these alleged ‘barrel bomb’ attacks, over 2014-2015, have been places occupied for years by sectarian Islamist gangs: north-eastern Aleppo, Douma in north-eastern Damascus and Raqqa in the eastern desert. The US-based group Human Rights Watch (tightly linked to the US foreign policy body, the Council on Foreign Relations) published a map showing the sites of literally hundreds of these barrel bomb attacks in ‘opposition held’ north-east Aleppo (HRW 2014).

The ‘opposition’ in these areas has been the official al Qaeda franchise in Syria, Jabhat al Nusra, allied with the Saudi-backed ‘Islamic Front’ (a merger of former Free Syrian Army groups Harakat Ahrar as-Sham, Suqur as-Sham, Liwa at-Tawhid, Jaysh al-Islam, Jabhat al-Kurdiyya, Liwa al-Haqq and Ahrar as-Sham), then later the ‘Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant’ (ISIL), the Turkistan Islamic Party and the Army of Conquest. Virtually all these groups are terrorist organisations responsible for multiple atrocities in Syria. It is hardly surprising, then, that the Syrian Army regularly bombs them. Contrary to the myth of the ‘moderate rebel’, the terrorist groups most often work together. For example, a top US-backed leader of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Abdel Jabbar el-Okaidi, was quite open about the fact that he worked closely with ISIL-Daesh (see Eretz Zen 2014). The FSA has worked closely with the other main al Qaeda group, Jabhat al Nusra, from the beginning.

The source of the ‘civilian’ death claims comes almost exclusively from the Islamist groups themselves, or ‘activists’ embedded with them. Those claims are then magnified by
the western media and by some human rights NGOs which are effectively ‘embedded’ with western governments’ foreign policies. Casualty numbers are typically provided by the British-based ‘Syrian Observatory on Human Rights’ (SOHR 2015), the British-based Syrian Network for Human Rights (SN4HR 2015), or the Istanbul-based Violation Documentation Center in Syria (VDC 2015; Masi 2015). All these centres are allied to the Islamist gangs, but usually maintain some public distance from ISIL. The VDC has listed some ISIL causal-
ities in Syria as ‘martyrs’ for the revolution (see Sterling 2015b). However my main point is that they are all partisan voices, sectarian Islamists committed to overthrow of the secular state and highly motivated to vilify and lie about the Syrian Army.

Commander in Chief of the propaganda war, US President Obama, leads the way, claiming his Syrian counterpart ‘drops barrel bombs to massacre innocent children’ (Obama in Mosendz 2015). As there has never been any evidence that President Assad had any such intent, Parry (2015) is right to call this statement ‘crude and deceptive propaganda’. The White House is backed up by ‘embedded watchdog’ Human Rights Watch, whose boss Kenneth Roth obsessively repeats the words ‘barrel bombs’, and has even been exposed posting photos of devastated Gaza and Kobane, falsely claiming that both showed Aleppo after ‘Assad’s barrel bombing’ (MOA 2015; Interventions Watch 2015).

In fact those photos showed the results of Israeli, US and ISIL bombing. The recycling of war dead photos seems to have become routine. Yet the foundation of western war prop-
aganda is the consistent reliance on partisan sources. The ‘barrel bomb’ campaign is clearly designed to delegitimise the Syrian Government and the Syrian Army, and also perhaps to deter or slow the attacks on Islamist groups. However the Syrian Army does not apolo-
gise to anyone for bombing terrorist held areas, and they have always made well-publicised efforts to evacuate civilians before doing so.

Most civilians in the areas said to have been ‘barrel bombed’ left a very long time ago. In January 2015 Reuters (2015a) showed video of some of the last large evacuations of Douma (north-east Damascus) by the Syrian Army. Several months later the same agency decried a massacre of ‘civilians’ in Douma, using the ‘activists’ of the SOHR as their source (Reuters 2015b). Repetition of these fake claims by the armed groups and their associat-
ed ‘activists’ led to headlines like: ‘The Syrian Regime’s Barrel Bombs Kill More Civilians than ISIS and Al Qaeda Combined’ (Masi 2015). Such stories suggest the need for deeper
The photos of dead and injured women and children in the ghost towns inhabited by the armed groups are simply borrowed from other contexts. Amnesty International (USA) largely adopted the barrel bomb story, along with the invented ‘civilian’ casualty numbers. Yet Amnesty shares that same weakness in method: relying on partisan sources like the VDC, the SN4HR and the SOHR. Amnesty’s pro-western bias has led it into repeating NATO-contrived falsehoods in other conflicts, such as in Kuwait and Libya (see Sterling 2015b).

None of this is to say that the Syrian Army has not killed civilians, particularly those embedded with the terrorist groups. However many Syrians, whose families have been directly affected by the terrorist attacks, question why the Government has not carpet-bombed areas like Douma, north-east Aleppo and parts of Raqqa. They say the only civilians remaining there are those that support the throat-cutting gangs. The US certainly did not hesitate to carpet bomb the Iraqi resistance in Fallujah (Iraq), back in 2004 (Democracy Now 2005). Yet in Syria, as one former member of the Government militia said, things have been different:

‘Islamists [do] hide behind civilians. But if we really killed everyone who supported the enemy, the Douma district would have been destroyed long ago – simply levelled with tanks in a single day, like some [Syrian] hotheads have been [demanding] for a long time already. But Assad doesn’t want that … our task is to reunite the country. Therefore, before each mission, we were told that we should not shoot at civilians under any circumstances. If a civilian dies, there is always an investigation and, if necessary, a court-martial’ (Mizah 2015).

Such concerns are simply ignored in the self-obsessed and reckless western debate.

Great care is also needed with the claims of outsiders who run opinion polls in Syria. For example, although the British-based ORB International is not a government agency, it is financed within a hostile state and engages with debates of concern to the belligerent parties. Case in point: its mid-2014 poll suggested that ‘Three in Five Syrians Support International Military Involvement’ (ORB 2014: Table 1). This proposal is an issue that only really preoccupies western governments and the figure is implausible.

First of all, those Syrians who support the government (by most accounts a strong majority of the population) have always opposed foreign intervention.

Second, most of the Syrian Opposition also opposes foreign intervention. The most comprehensive Syrian opposition document, the Damascus Declaration (2005), opposed both armed attacks on the government and foreign intervention. Only the Muslim Brotherhood, some exile figures and some of the Kurdish groups later split from this position. The suggestion that, after three years of war and tremendous suffering, which has already involved high levels of NATO and Gulf Monarchy intervention, 60% of Syrians want more of that sort of foreign intervention just does not sit with the known facts. It does fit with an unrepresentative poll which elevates the voices of those backing the armed groups. We need to look at the way ORB collects information.

Their methods are opaque. The British group carries out polls in Syria by employing small numbers of Syrians with whom they communicate by phone and internet. These local agents are then trained to select and interview small groups of people across Syria. ORB provides little information on how they select their agents or on how those people, in turn, select their interviewees. They simply assert that their poll was representative. The mid-2014 poll claimed to have that found that 4% of Syrians said the [Saudi Arabia-backed

ISIL was, by then, the most prominent armed anti-Government group. That result (4% support) could be plausible, and not inconsistent with other information. But its reliability is undermined by the implausibly high level of support for foreign military intervention. A further anomaly is that the ORB poll of July 2015 showed ISIL to be viewed positively by 21% of Syrians (ORB 2015: Table 3). Although this was not exactly the same question, the difference between these figures (4% and 21%) is huge and hardly explicable by anything that had occurred between 2014 and 2015. No-one else has suggested that the fanatics of ISIL-Daesh are anything close to that popular. The 35% ‘net positive view’ of the terrorist group Jabhat al Nusra (ORB 2015), notorious for its suicide truck bombings and beheadings is also implausible. Indeed, how could one third of any society view ‘positively’ foreign-led terrorist groups, best known for their atrocities? Something is very wrong here.

The most reasonable explanation is that serious bias affects the ‘representativeness’ of selection for the ORB surveys. ORB was previously criticised by an academic paper for its opaque and ‘incomplete disclosure’ of method and ‘important irregularities’ in their estimates of deaths from the war in Iraq (Spagat and Dougherty 2010). That unreliability is also present in their Syrian data. Despite what seems like highly inflated support for the al Qaeda groups, the 2015 poll still shows President Assad as the most positively viewed force in the country, although at only 47% (ORB 2015: Table 3), a figure much lower than that of any other poll (Syrian or non-Syrian) during the crisis. Interestingly, the ORB 2015 poll says 82% of Syrians believe ISIL was created by the US (ORB 2015: Table 20). However given the other anomalies of the survey it is not possible to place any reliance on this figure. It seems plain that the ORB polls, through their mostly undisclosed selection processes, have given an enhanced voice to certain groups of anti-government people. That is perhaps not surprising, for a British company, and it may help reinforce popular discussion in western countries. However it does not help foreign understandings of Syria.

While it is important to recognise the sources of bias, the repetition of anti-Syrian stories based on partisan sources cannot be a matter of simple bias. We know from independent evidence that earlier claims of massacres were fabricated by the sectarian groups, then backed by Washington. This has been documented with respect to mass killings at Houla, Aqrab, Daraya, and East Ghouta (see Chapters Seven and Eight). After these exposures, there were no apologies or admissions either from the White House or the western media channels which ran the initial stories. This pattern means that other false allegations are likely. While genuine students of the crisis must revert to principled study of claims and counter-claims, we should also recognise there is an industrial scale propaganda machine, likely to maintain production into the foreseeable future.

References


14- THE DIRTY WAR ON SYRIA -14


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"The protest movement in Syria was overwhelmingly peaceful until September 2011" - Human Rights Watch, March 2012, Washington

"I have seen from the beginning armed protesters in those demonstrations ... they were the first to fire on the police. Very often the violence of the security forces comes in response to the brutal violence of the armed insurgents" – the late Father Frans Van der Lugt, January 2012, Homs Syria

"The claim that armed opposition to the government has begun only recently is a complete lie. The killings of soldiers, police and civilians, often in the most brutal circumstances, have been going on virtually since the beginning." - Professor Jeremy Salt, October 2011, Ankara Turkey

A double story began on the Syrian conflict, at the outset of the armed violence in 2011, in the southern border town of Daraa. The first story comes from independent witnesses in Syria, such as the late Father Frans Van der Lugt in Homs. They say that armed men infiltrated the early political reform demonstrations to shoot at both police and civilians. This violence came from sectarian Islamists. The second comes from the Islamist groups ('rebels') and their western backers. They claim there was 'indiscriminate' violence from Syrian security forces to repress political rallies and that the 'rebels' grew out of a secular political reform movement.

Careful study of the independent evidence, however, shows that the Washington-backed 'rebels' story, while widespread, was part of a strategy to delegitimise the Syrian Government, with the aim of fomenting 'regime change'. To understand this it is necessary to observe that, prior to the armed insurrection of March 2011 there were shipments of arms from Saudi Arabia to Islamists at the al Omari mosque. It is also useful to review the earlier Muslim Brotherhood insurrection at Hama in 1982, because of the parallel myths that have grown up around both insurrections.
US intelligence (DIA 1982) and the late British author Patrick Seale (1988) give independent accounts of what happened at Hama. After years of violent, sectarian attacks by Syria’s Muslim Brotherhood, by mid-1980 President Hafez al Assad had ‘broken the back’ of their sectarian rebellion, which aimed to impose a Salafi-Islamic state. One final coup plot was exposed and the Brotherhood ‘felt pressured into initiating’ an uprising in their stronghold of Hama. Seale describes the start of that violence in this way:

‘At 2am on the night of 2-3 February 1982 an army unit combing the old city fell into an ambush. Roof top snipers killed perhaps a score of soldiers ... [Brotherhood leader] Abu Bakr [Umar Jawwad] gave the order for a general uprising ... hundreds of Islamist fighters rose ... by the morning some seventy leading Ba’athists had been slaughtered and the triumphant guerrillas declared the city ‘liberated’ (Seale 1988: 332).

However the Army responded with a huge force of about 12,000 and the battle raged for three weeks. It was a foreign-backed civil war, with some defections from the army. Seale continues:

‘As the tide turned slowly in the government’s favour, the guerrillas fell back into the old quarters ... after heavy shelling, commandos and party irregulars supported by tanks moved in ... many civilians were slaughtered in the prolonged mopping up, whole districts razed’ (Seale 1988: 333).

Two months later a US intelligence report said:

‘The total casualties for the Hama incident probably number about 2,000. This includes an estimated 300 to 400 members of the Muslim Brotherhood’s elite ‘Secret Apparatus’ (DIA 1982: 7).

Seale recognises that the Army also suffered heavy losses. At the same time, ‘large numbers died in the hunt for the gunmen ... government sympathizers estimating a mere 3,000 and critics as many as 20,000 ... a figure of 5,000 to 10,000 could be close to the truth’ He adds: ‘The guerrillas were formidable opponents. They had a fortune in foreign money ... [and] no fewer than 15,000 machine guns’ (Seale 1988: 335).

Subsequent Muslim Brotherhood accounts have inflated the casualties, reaching up to ‘40,000 civilians’, thus attempting to hide their insurrection and sectarian massacres by claiming that Hafez al Assad had carried out a ‘civilian massacre’ (e.g. Nassar 2014). The then Syrian President blamed a large scale foreign conspiracy for the Hama insurrection. Seale observes that Hafez was ‘not paranoical’, as many US weapons were captured and foreign backing had come from several US collaborators: King Hussayn of Jordan, Lebanese Christian militias (the Israeli-aligned ‘Guardians of the Cedar’) and Saddam Hussein in Iraq (Seale 1988: 336-337).

The Hama insurrection helps us understand the Daraa violence because, once again in 2011, we saw armed Islamists using rooftop sniping against police and government officials, drawing in the armed forces, only to cry ‘civilian massacre’ when they and their collaborators came under attack from the Army. Although the US, through its allies, played an important part in the Hama insurrection, when it was all over US intelligence dryly observed that: ‘the Syrians are pragmatists who do not want a Muslim Brotherhood government’ (DIA 1982: vii).

In the case of Daraa, and the attacks that moved to Homs and surrounding areas in April 2011, the clearly stated aim was once again to topple the secular or ‘infidel-Alawi’ regime. The front-line US collaborators were Saudi Arabia and Qatar, then Turkey. The head of the Syrian Brotherhood, Muhammad Riyad Al-Shaqfa, issued a statement on 28 March which left no doubt that the group’s aim was sectarian.
The enemy was ‘the secular regime’ and Brotherhood members ‘have to make sure that the revolution will be pure Islamic, and with that no other sect would have a share of the credit after its success’ (Al-Shaqfa 2011). While playing down the initial role of the Brotherhood, Sheikho confirms that it ‘went on to punch above its actual weight on the ground during the uprising ... [due] to Turkish-Qatari support’, and to its general organisational capacity (Sheikho 2013). By the time there was a ‘Free Syrian Army Supreme Military Council’ in 2012 (more a weapons conduit than any sort of army command), it was said to be two-thirds dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood (Draitser 2012). Other foreign Salafi-Islamist groups quickly joined this ‘Syrian Revolution’. A US intelligence report in August 2012, contrary to Washington’s public statements about ‘moderate rebels’, said:

‘The Salafist, the Muslim Brotherhood and AQI [Al Qaeda in Iraq, later ISIS] are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria ... AQI supported the Syrian Opposition from the beginning, both ideologically and through the media’ (DIA 2012).

In February 2011 there was popular agitation in Syria, to some extent influenced by the events in Egypt and Tunisia. There were anti-government and pro-government demonstrations, and a genuine political reform movement which for several years had agitated against corruption and the Ba’ath Party monopoly. A 2005 report referred to ‘an array of reform movements slowly organizing beneath the surface’ (Ghadry 2005), and indeed the ‘many faces’ of a Syrian opposition, much of it non-Islamist, had been agitating since about that same time (Sayyid Rasas 2013). These political opposition groups deserve attention, in another discussion (see Chapter 3). However only one section of that opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Salafists, was linked to the violence that erupted in Daraa. Large anti-government demonstrations began, to be met with huge pro-government demonstrations. In early March some teenagers in Daraa were arrested for graffiti that had been copied from North Africa ‘the people want to overthrow the regime’. It was reported that they were abused by local police, President Bashar al Assad intervened, the local governor was sacked and the teenagers were released (Abouzeid 2011).

Yet the Islamist insurrection was underway, taking cover under the street demonstrations. On 11 March, several days before the violence broke out in Daraa, there were reports that Syrian forces had seized ‘a large shipment of weapons and explosives and night-vision goggles ... in a truck coming from Iraq’. The truck was stopped at the southern Tanaf crossing, close to Jordan.

The Syrian Government news agency SANA said the weapons were intended ‘for use in actions that affect Syria’s internal security and spread unrest and chaos.’ Pictures showed ‘dozens of grenades and pistols as well as rifles and ammunition belts’. The driver said the weapons had been loaded in Baghdad and he had been paid $5,000 to deliver them to Syria (Reuters 2011). Despite this interception, arms did reach Daraa, a border town of about 150,000 people. This is where the ‘western-rebel’ and the independent stories diverge, and diverge dramatically. The western media consensus was that protestors burned and trashed government offices, and then ‘provincial security forces opened fire on marchers, killing several’ (Abouzeid 2011). After that, ‘protestors’ staged demonstrations in front of the al-Omari mosque, but were in turn attacked.

The Syrian government, on the other hand, said there were unprovoked attacks on security forces, killing police and civilians, along with the burning of government offices. There was foreign corroboration of this account. While its headline blamed security forces for killing ‘protestors’, the British Daily Mail (2011) showed pictures of guns, AK47 rifles and hand grenades that security forces had recovered after storming the al-Omari mosque. The paper noted reports that ‘an armed gang’ had opened fire on an ambulance, killing ‘a doc-
tor, a paramedic and a policeman’. Media channels in neighbouring countries did report on the killing of Syrian police, on 17-18 March.

On 21 March a Lebanese news report observed that ‘Seven policemen were killed during clashes between the security forces and protesters in Syria’ (YaLibnan 2011), while an Israel National News report said ‘Seven police officers and at least four demonstrators in Syria have been killed ... and the Baath party headquarters and courthouse were torched’ (Queenan 2011). These police had been targeted by rooftop snipers.

Even in these circumstances the Government was urging restraint and attempting to respond to the political reform movement. President Assad’s adviser, Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban, told a news conference that the President had ordered ‘that live ammunition should not be fired, even if the police, security forces or officers of the state were being killed’. Assad proposed to address the political demands, such as the registration of political parties, removing emergency rules and allowing greater media freedoms (al-Khalidi 2011). None of that seemed to either interest or deter the Islamists.

Several reports, including video reports, observed rooftop snipers firing at crowds and police, during funerals of those already killed. It was said to be ‘unclear who was firing at whom’ (Al Jazeera 2011a), as ‘an unknown armed group on rooftops shot at protesters and security forces’ (Maktabi 2011). Yet Al Jazeera (2011b) owned by the Qatari monarchy, soon strongly suggested that that the snipers were pro-government. ‘President Bashar al-Assad has sent thousands of Syrian soldiers and their heavy weaponry into Derra for an operation the regime wants nobody in the word to see’, the Qatari channel said. However the Al Jazeera suggestion that secret pro-government snipers were killing ‘soldiers and protesters alike’ was illogical and out of sequence. The armed forces came to Daraa precisely because police had been shot and killed.

Saudi Arabia, a key US regional ally, had armed and funded extremist Salafist Sunni sects to move against the secular government. Saudi official Anwar Al-Eshki later confirmed to BBC television that his country had sent arms to Daraa and to the al-Omari mosque (Truth Syria 2012). From exile in Saudi Arabia, Salafi Sheikh Adnan Arour called for a holy war against the liberal Alawi Muslims, who were said to dominate the Syrian government: ‘by Allah we shall mince [the Alawites] in meat grinders and feed their flesh to the dogs’ (MEMRITV 2011). The Salafist aim was a theocratic state or caliphate. The genocidal slogan ‘Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the grave’ became widespread, a fact reported by the North American media as early as May 2011 (e.g. Blanford 2011). Islamists from the FSA Farouq brigade would soon act on these threats (Crimi 2012). Canadian analyst Michel Chossudovsky (2011) observed:

‘The deployment of armed forces including tanks in Daraa [was] directed against an organised armed insurrection, which has been active in the border city since March 17-18.’

After those first few days in Daraa the killing of Syrian security forces continued, but went largely unreported outside Syria. Nevertheless, independent analyst Sharmine Narwani wrote about the scale of this killing in early 2012 and again in mid-2014. An ambush and massacre of soldiers took place near Daraa in late March or early April. An army convoy was stopped by an oil slick on a valley road between Daraa al-Mahata and Daraa al-Balad and the trucks were machine gunned. Estimates of soldier deaths, from government and opposition sources ranged from 18 to 60. A Daraa resident said these killings were not reported because: ‘At that time, the government did not want to show they are weak and the opposition did not want to show they are armed’. Anti-Syrian Government blogger,
Nizar Nayouf, records this massacre as taking place in the last week of March. Another anti-Government writer, Rami Abdul Rahman (based in England, and calling himself the ‘Syrian Observatory of Human Rights’) says:

‘It was on the first of April and about 18 or 19 security forces ... were killed’ (Narwani 2014). Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mikdad, himself a resident of Daraa, confirmed that: ‘this incident was hidden by the government ... as an attempt not to antagonize or not to raise emotions and to calm things down – not to encourage any attempt to inflame emotions which may lead to escalation of the situation’ (Narwani 2014).

Yet the significance of denying armed anti-Government killings was that, in the western media, all deaths were reported as (a) victims of the Army and (b) civilians. For well over six months, when a body count was mentioned in the international media, it was usually considered acceptable to suggest these were all ‘protestors’ killed by the Syrian Army. For example, a Reuters report on 24 March said Daraa’s main hospital had received ‘the bodies of at least 37 protestors killed on Wednesday’ (Khalidi 2011). Notice that all the dead had become ‘protestors’, despite earlier reports on the killing of a number of police and health workers.

Another nineteen soldiers were gunned down on 25 April, also near Daraa. Narwani obtained their names and details from Syria’s Defence Ministry, and corroborated these details from another document from a non-government source. Throughout April 2011 she calculates that eighty-eight Syrian soldiers were killed ‘by unknown shooters in different areas across Syria’ (Narwani 2014). She went on to refute claims that the soldiers killed were ‘defectors’, shot by the Syrian army for refusing to fire on civilians. Human Rights Watch, referring to interviews with 50 unnamed ‘activists’, claimed that soldiers killed at this time were all ‘defectors’, murdered by the Army (HRW 2011b). Yet the funerals of loyal officers, shown on the internet at that time, were distinct. Even Rami Abdul Rahman (the SOHR), keen to blame the Army for killing civilians, said ‘this game of saying the Army is killing defectors for leaving – I never accepted this’ (Narwani 2014). Nevertheless the highly charged reports were confusing.

The violence spread north, with the assistance of ‘Islamist fighters’ from Lebanon, reaching Baniyas and areas around Homs. On 10 April nine soldiers were shot in a bus ambush in Baniyas. In Homs, on April 17, General Abdo Khodr al-Tallawi was killed with his two sons and a nephew, and Syrian commander Iyad Kamel Harfoush was gunned down near his home. Two days later, off-duty Colonel Mohammad Abdo Khadour was killed in his car (Narwani 2014). North American commentator Joshua Landis (2011a) reported the death of his wife’s cousin, one of the soldiers in Baniyas. These were not the only deaths but I mention them because most western media channels maintain the fiction, to this day, that there was no ‘Islamist insurrection’ and the ‘peaceful protestors’ did not pick up arms until September 2011.

Al Jazeera, the principal Middle East media channel backing the Muslim Brotherhood, blacked out these attacks, as also the reinforcement provided by armed foreigners. Former Al Jazeera journalist Ali Hashem was one of many who resigned from the Qatar-owned station (RT 2012), complaining of deep bias over their presentation of the violence in Syria. Hashem had footage of armed men arriving from Lebanon, but this was censored by his Qatari managers. ‘In a resignation letter I was telling the executive ... it was like nothing was happening in Syria.’ He thought the ‘Libyan revolution’ was the turning point for Al Jazeera, marking the end of its standing as a credible media group (Hashem 2012).

Provocateurs were at work. Tunisian jihadist ‘Abu Qusay’ later admitted he had been a prominent ‘Syrian rebel’ charged with ‘destroying and desecrating Sunni mosques’, includ-
ing by scrawling the graffiti ‘There is no God but Bashar’, a blasphemy to devout Muslims. This was then blamed on the Syrian Army, with the aim of creating Sunni defections from the Army. ‘Abu Qusay’ had been interviewed by foreign journalists who did not notice by his accent that he was not Syrian (Eretz Zen 2014).

US Journalist Nir Rosen, whose reports were generally critical of the Syrian Government, also attacked the western consensus over the early violence:

‘The issue of defectors is a distraction. Armed resistance began long before defections started ... Every day the opposition gives a death toll, usually without any explanation ... Many of those reported killed are in fact dead opposition fighters but ... described in reports as innocent civilians killed by security forces ... and every day members of the Syrian Army, security agencies ... are also killed by anti-regime fighters’ (Rosen 2012).

A language and numbers game was being played to delegitimise the Syrian Government (‘The Regime’) and the Syrian Army (‘Assad loyalists’), suggesting they were responsible for all the violence. Just as NATO forces were bombing Libya with the aim of overthrowing the Libyan Government, US officials began to demand that President Assad step down. The Brookings Institution (Shaikh 2011) claimed the President had ‘lost the legitimacy to remain in power in Syria’. US Senators John McCain, Lindsay Graham and Joe Lieberman said it was time ‘to align ourselves unequivocally with the Syrian people in their peaceful demand for a democratic government’ (FOX News 2011). Another ‘regime change’ campaign was out in the open.

In June, US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton dismissed the idea that ‘foreign instigators’ had been at work, saying that ‘the vast majority of casualties have been unarmed civilians’ (Clinton 2011). In fact, as Clinton knew very well, her Saudi Arabian allies had armed extremists from the very beginning. Her casualty assertion was also wrong. The United Nations (which would later abandon its body count) estimated from several sources that, by early 2012, there were more than 5,000 casualties, and that deaths in the first year of conflict included 478 police and 2,091 from the military and security forces (OHCHR 2012: 2; Narwani 2014). That is, more than half the casualties in the first year were those of the Syrian security forces. That independent calculation was not reflected in western media reports.

Western groups such as Human Rights Watch, along with US columnists (e.g. Allaf 2012) continued to claim, even after the early 2012 defeat of the sectarian Farouq-FSA in Homs, and well into 2012, that Syrian security forces had been massacring ‘unarmed protestors’, that the Syrian people ‘had no choice’ but to take up arms, and that this ‘protest movement’ had been ‘overwhelmingly peaceful until September 2011’ (HRW 2011a, HRW 2012). The evidence cited above shows that this story was quite false.

In fact, the political reform movement had been driven off the streets by Salafi-Islamist gunmen, over the course of March and April. For years opposition groups had agitated against corruption and the Ba’ath Party monopoly. However most did not want destruction of what was a socially inclusive if authoritarian state, and most were against both the sectarian violence and the involvement of foreign powers. They backed Syria’s protection of minorities, the relatively high status of women and the country’s free education and health care, while opposing the corrupt networks and the feared political police (Wikstrom 2011; Otrakji 2012).

In June reporter Hala Jaber (2011) observed that about five thousand people turned up for a demonstration at Ma’arrat al-Numan, a small town in north-west Syria, between
Aleppo and Hama. She says several ‘protestors’ had been shot the week before, while trying to block the road between Damascus and Aleppo. After some negotiations which reduced the security forces in the town, ‘men with heavy beards in cars and pick-ups with no registration plates’ with ‘rifles and rocket-propelled grenades’ began shooting at the reduced numbers of security forces. A military helicopter was sent to support the security forces. After this clash ‘four policemen and 12 of their attackers were dead or dying. Another 20 policemen were wounded’. Officers who escaped the fight were hidden by some of the tribal elders who had participated in the original demonstration. When the next ‘demonstration for democracy’ took place, the following Friday, ‘only 350 people turned up’, mostly young men and some bearded militants (Jaber 2011). Five thousand protestors had been reduced to 350, after the open Salafist attacks.

After months of media manipulations, disguising the Islamist insurrection, Syrians such as Samer al Akhras, a young man from a Sunni family, who used to watch Al Jazeera because he preferred it to state TV, became convinced to back the Syrian government. He saw first-hand the fabrication of reports on Al Jazeera and wrote, in late June 2011:

I am a Syrian citizen and I am a human. After 4 months of your fake freedom … You say peaceful demonstration and you shoot our citizen. From today … I am [now] a Sergeant in the Reserve Army. If I catch anyone … in any terrorist organization working on the field in Syria I am gonna shoot you as you are shooting us. This is our land not yours, the slaves of American fake freedom (Al Akhras 2011).

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It should go without saying that the internal political processes of a sovereign country belong to the people of that country, and no-one else. Nevertheless, as Washington insists on a prerogative to determine who can or cannot lead another country, some background on Bashar al Assad and the political reform process in Syria might be useful. We find little reasonable discussion of either, in western circles, after the Islamist insurrection of 2011. Instead, the wartime discussion descended into caricatures, conditioned by ‘regime-change’ fervour and bloody war, of a bloodthirsty ‘brutal dictator’ mindlessly repressing and slaughtering his own people. None of this helps sensible or principled understandings. Fortunately, there are a range of Syrian and independent sources that allow us to put together a more realistic picture.

If we believed most western media reports we would think President Assad had launched repeated and indiscriminate attacks on civilians, including the gassing of children. We might also think he heads an ‘Alawi regime’, where a 12% minority represses a Sunni Muslim majority, crushing a popular ‘revolution’ which, only in later years, was ‘hijacked’ by extremists. A key problem with that story is the President’s great popularity at home. The fact that there has been popular dissatisfaction with corruption and cronyism, fear of the secret police, and that an authoritarian state maintains a type of personality cult, does not negate the man’s genuine popularity. Even most of his enemies admit that. We have to look a bit deeper.

A mild mannered eye doctor, with part of his training in Britain, Bashar al Assad was effectively conscripted to the Presidency by the Ba’ath Party after the death of his father Hafez, in 2000. He was expected on the one hand to maintain his father’s pluralist and nationalist legacy, yet on the other hand develop important elements of political and economic reform. President Hafez al Assad had brought three decades of internal stability to Syria, after the turmoil of the 1960s. This allowed important social advances. Social divisions were smoothed through strong pressures to identify as Syrian, without regard for religion or community. There were substantial improvements in education and health, including universal vaccination and improved literacy for women. Between 1970 and 2010 infant mortality fell from 132 to 14 (per 1,000), while maternal mortality fell from 482 to 45 (per 100,000). These were particularly good outcomes for a country with very modest levels of GDP per capita (Sen, Al-Faisal and Al-Saleh 2012: 196). Electricity supply to rural areas rose from 2% in 1963 to 95% in 1992 (Hinnebusch 2012: 2). Traditions of social pluralism combined with advances in education drove the human development of the country well ahead of many of the more wealthy states in the region.

Nevertheless, while the system built by Hafez al Assad was socially inclusive it also remained an authoritarian one-party sys-
tem, conditioned by war with Israel and periodic violent insurrection by the Muslim Brotherhood. US intelligence observed that the crushing of the Muslim Brotherhood’s insurrections in the early 1980s was welcomed by most Syrians (DIA 1982, vii). Yet, after that, criticism of the government was viewed with great suspicion. Sectarian groups were banned, as was the acceptance of foreign funds for political purposes. In that climate some opposition figures said that Syrians felt helpless, and ‘did not know how to … take initiative or discuss and develop their ideas’ (Wikas 2007: 6). ‘The feared Syrian secret police’ were ever vigilant for Zionist spies and new Muslim Brotherhood conspiracies, but this meant they also harassed a wider range of government critics (Seale 1988: 335). From the secular opposition side, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party was unhappy with the failed compromise left by Hafez al Assad, by which the constitution required that the President be a Muslim (al Akhbar, 22 Feb 2012). On top of this, there was resentment at the corruption built on cronyism through Ba’ath Party networks. Bashar faced all this when he came to the top job.

This chapter reviews the political reform movement, from the time Bashar al Assad became President until the Islamist insurrection of 2011. It then examines the best evidence on the extent of domestic support for the President.

The Reform Movement

At the start of the millennium, Bashar al Assad was the official candidate for reform, but there was also a fairly large if fragmented anti-Ba’ath Party political opposition. Many saw the chance of reform through the youthful new President while others, particularly the banned Muslim Brotherhood, wanted to dismantle the secular state, establishing some sort of theocracy. Yet the simple fact of a change of leadership to a youthful and western educated man gave rise to the idea of a ‘Damascus Spring’, in the year 2000.

Bashar was widely seen as an agent of reform, but his rise was meteoric and quite dependent on the networks of the ruling Ba’ath Party which had recruited him. There were no dramatic political reforms, despite the widespread complaints of corruption (Otrakji 2012). However his socio-economic reforms involved giving new impetus to mass education and citizenship, with a controlled economic liberalisation which opened up new markets, yet without the privatisations that had swept Eastern Europe. He released several thousand political prisoners, mainly Islamists and their sympathisers (Landis and Pace 2007: 47).

He probably had little room for political reform in the early years as he did not have an organised constituency outside the Ba’ath Party. Perhaps in part to compensate for this he built links with businessmen and initiated several government sponsored NGOs amongst youth, students, other ‘civil society’ sectors and rural workers. These groups included the Syrian Trust for Development and the Fund for Integrated Rural Development of Syria (FIRDOS). First Lady Asma al Assad played a prominent role in some of these groups, particularly those to do with youth and children. They attracted some international partners, including the UNDP and UNICEF (Kawakibi 2013).

One US analyst says the Damascus Spring of 2000 saw a ‘flowering of expression, assembly and political action unknown since the 1950s’ (Wikas 2007: 4). Despite the market reforms, Syria maintained its virtually free health and education system. State universities also remain virtually free, to this day, with several hundred thousand enrolled students. That sort of mass education is critical, the foundation of social empowerment.

In this period a number of critical political discussion groups were established, including the Kawakibi forum, the Atassi Forum and the National Dialogue Forum. They began to
issue statements of demand on the government, one of which had 1,000 signatories (Landis and Pace 2007: 47). However ‘state of emergency’ laws still applied and military intelligence saw conspirators in some of these groups, leading to arrests in what some called a 'Damascus Winter'. Some of the prisoners were reported as tortured and killed (Ghadry 2005; Ulutas 2011: 89-90). Despite this, some relatively well informed US analysts say the ‘Damascus Spring’ left some ‘lasting if modest accomplishments’. There was no unified opposition, but for the first time in many years ‘individuals could vocalise critical views of the regime in public settings’. Some of the discussion groups survived for some years, including the Committee for the revival of Civil Society and the Attasi Forum for Democratic Dialogue (Landis and Pace 2007: 48-49).

However, with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Syria was caught between two powerful occupying armies, Israel and the USA, both hostile to the Syrian state. More than a million Iraqi refugees passed into Syria, to escape the carnage. Syria’s generosity with Iraqi refugees was met with US accusations that it was backing the Iraqi resistance, and sanctions were imposed. Yet it was Syria's abrupt withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, after 30 years of occupation, and Lebanon’s subsequent ‘Cedar Revolution’, which helped sparked another period of opposition activity. Even though this Lebanese ‘revolution’ has been assessed with great scepticism (Narwani 2015), it did help initiate a show of extraordinary unity amongst Syrian opposition groups. The charter declaration from that time remains as quite a good indication of the principles on which all those diverse groups they were able to agree.

The October 2005 gathering which created the ‘Damascus Declaration’, pressing for democratic reform, is said to have been ‘the largest opposition gathering in the history of Ba’ath Party rule’, since 1963. It included Islamists, liberals, Marxists as well as Arab and Kurdish nationalists (Rasas 2013). It cited principles of pluralism, non-violence, opposition unity and democratic change (Ulutas 2011: 90).

The statement began with the assertion that Ba’athist rule had disempowered people, claiming that ‘the authorities’ monopoly of everything for more than 30 years has established an authoritarian, totalitarian and cliquish regime that has led to a lack of [interest in] politics in society, with people losing interest in public affairs’. The Declaration called for ‘establishment of a democratic national regime … peaceful, gradual, founded on accord and based on dialogue and recognition of the other.’

It shunned violence and exclusion, gave qualified support for Islam as ‘the most prominent cultural component in the life of the nation’ and rejected the idea of a one-party state. Emergency law, martial law and special courts had to be abolished, with a ‘strengthen[ing] of the national army’ while keeping it ‘outside the framework of political conflict and the democratic game’. Popular organisations, trade unions and other bodies had to be liberated ‘from the custodianship of the state and from [Ba’athist] party and security hegemony’. It was a mostly secular statement. The new system should ‘emphasize Syria’s affiliation to the Arab Order’ with a view to Arab unity. There was a ‘rejection of change that is brought in from abroad’ and a call for a ‘just democratic solution’ for the ‘Kurdish issue in Syria’. The document ended calling for a ‘national conference’ which would lead to the election of a Constituent Assembly’ and a new constitution on the basis of a political majority (Damascus Declaration 2005).

That level of opposition unity broke down fairly quickly, on perhaps predictable lines. As Landis and Pace (2007: 46) put it ‘Leaders of the Marxist left and Islamic right struggled to find common ground’, as liberals, exiles, Kurds and Assyrians also participated (Uutas 2011: 90). First the Muslim Brotherhood (along with defected Ba’athist Abdel-Halim
Khaddam) created its own Islamist ‘Salvation Front’, in 2006. Then at the Damascus Declaration’s National Council meeting in December 2007 the Socialist Union and Communist Action parties rejected the liberal-Kurd parties’ ambition for an ‘external factor’ to help bring about change. The socialist and communist parties, along with the Kurdish Left Party (and later a second Kurdish party led by Nasreddin Ibrahim), began to look for a ‘third way’ between the Damascus Declaration and the Ba’athist Government.

The Muslim Brotherhood left altogether in early 2009 while in late 2009 the Kurdish groups (minus the PYD) formed the Kurdish Political Council (Rasas 2013). The Government also moved against some of the signatories. The Atassi Forum was closed (Ulutas 2011: 91). In March 2005 the licenses of two US funded channels (Al Hurra and Radio Sawa) were removed (Landis and Pace 2007: 57). This fragmentation destroyed any real possibility of a unified opposition.

The basis for Islamist cooperation with pluralist, secular-nationalist and left parties was always very thin, mainly based on complaints about Baathist corruption and Government repression. But for a while they shared some rhetoric. As Kawakibi (2007: 3) points out, the Brotherhood ‘often cites human rights as being the casualty of a repressive system’, while being very selective of ‘those aspects which help their cause’. Their own record on human rights is appalling. They had sat in the Syrian parliament in the 1950s but, since then a fair amount of Syrian authoritarianism has had to do with suppressing their sectarian insurrections, including assassinations and massacres.

After the Damascus declaration a US report saw the ‘secular opposition’ as ‘all but powerless’, while suppression of the sectarian Islamists had ‘shaped the current government’s tactics and politics’ (Wikas 2007: 12, 22). Nevertheless, Arab nationalism and regional solidarity remained strong and the young President remained popular, in the region as well as in Syria. In 2009 a six country poll which cited Israel and the USA as the greatest threats to the region (at 88% and 77% respectively) also put Bashar al Assad as the most popular Arab leader in the Middle East (MESI 2009). That regional view was to change, after the 2011 outbreak of violence, as distinct from opinion within Syria.

With the rallies of February-March 2011 there was a further burst of political activity, mainly in the regional towns, not so much in Damascus and Aleppo (Ulutas 2011: 99-100). This time, however, things were different. Most of the domestic opposition groups, just as they had said in the 2005 declaration, did not support either armed attacks on the state or the involvement of foreign powers. Most remained in Syria and some, such as the Syrian Social National Party, rallied to the government. Others, while not supporting the government, backed the state and the army. Syria had seen sectarian Islamist violence before.

What became known in western circles as ‘the opposition’ were mostly exiles and the Islamists who had initiated the violence. The exile meetings began in Paris, Turkey and Brussels. A range of groups and individuals attended these initial meetings, but they were poorly coordinated, quickly came under foreign tutelage and the Muslim Brotherhood quickly ‘took a leading role’ (Ulutas 2011: 91-94). Western reports of the Islamist leadership were often generous, as the Muslim Brotherhood was better organised and therefore the most likely partner in any big power ‘regime change’ operation.

Hassan Mneimneh, for the Washington-based ‘Brussels Forum’, noted the real fears in the region of an ‘Islamist winter’, as the Arab Spring had handed the Islamists ‘an unexpected, maybe undeserved, victory’. Nevertheless, he goes on to exaggerate the support held by Muslim Brotherhood and other Salafist groups, claiming the Salafists appealed to ‘a sizeable fraction of the electorate’, while the Muslim Brotherhood could enjoy ‘a plurality or may
even be a slim majority’ (Mneimneh 2012: 1-4). This is neither consistent with Syria’s strong pluralist history nor supported by regional polls. For example a 1984 poll amongst Palestinians showed that, even though almost half the population was very religious (praying five times a day), far more religious in that sense than Syria, the secular nationalist politics of the PLO had 90% support.

This reflects badly on the Brotherhood strategy of attacking secular nationalist Palestinians before the occupying power. Israel, on the other hand, saw that ‘any success by the Brotherhood would be at the expense of the nationalists’, so ‘the Brotherhood is treated less harshly [by the Israelis] than the nationalists’ (Shadid 1988: 663, 674-675, 679). Support for Islam should not be confused with support for sectarian Islamists. A senior official in Damascus told me, in late 2013, that the Muslim Brotherhood had always been the largest and best organised opposition group in his country but that, at its best and when there was no violence, they might command a maximum of 15% support. That support would fall when the Brotherhood engaged in sectarian violence.

In the climate of events in Egypt and Tunisia, but two months before the violence broke out in Syria, President Assad said he would push for more reforms. ‘If you don’t see the need of reform before what happened in Egypt and Tunisia, it’s too late to do any reform’, he said. Specific to his agenda were municipal elections, greater power for NGOs and a new media law. His government had already increased heating oil subsidies (Solomon and Spindle 2011). A general elections bill followed soon after, although exiled critics reacted with scorn (Hatem 2011).

Others observed that Syria was quite different from Egypt, in that the government had promoted social and educational improvements, had no external debt, guaranteed minority rights and maintained a foreign policy independent of the US-Israeli agenda. ‘When Bashar al-Assad says that he supports political reform, many Syrians believe him … Syrians in recent years have enjoyed greater religious freedoms, which includes the Sunni majority’ (Hetou 2011). Syria was not Egypt.

A variety of civil ‘committees’ were formed in the social foment of 2011, many with a shifting character and with greater or lesser affiliation to the political parties. These included the Local Coordination Committees (LCC), the Federation of Coordination Committees of the Syrian revolution (FCC) and the National Action Committee. While a number began as neighbourhood groups, many of them became ‘more involved in media coordination than leadership of the protest movement’ (Asi Abu Najm 2011). The LCCs in mid-2011, while calling for ‘overthrowing the regime’, rejected the call ‘to take up arms or call for military intervention’, saying that ‘militarising the revolution would minimise popular support and participation’ (LCC 2011). By 2013, however, what remained of the LCCs seemed well embedded with Islamist armed groups, mainly reporting on their casualties (LCC 2013).

With the ‘Islamist insurrection’, lines between opposition groups began to harden, but attempts to find common ground persisted. A Paris-Damascus paper presented to opposition groups, minus the Muslim Brotherhood, was said to have ‘wavered between reform and change but did not call for overthrowing the government’. This was the basis for the creation of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change in Syria (NCC), a ‘third way’ group created in June 2011. It included the Socialist Union Party, the Marxist Left gathering, four of the Kurdish parties including the PYD and some independents. It was said to represent ‘the Arabist, Kurdish and Marxist left’ (Rasas 2013).

The following month, in July 2011, there was an attempt to create a Syrian National Council (SNC), linking the NCC with what remained of the Damascus Declaration and the
Muslim Brotherhood. However that plan failed because the Brotherhood and the Declaration group objected to the NCC’s demand for ‘rejection of external military intervention’ and for a ‘just solution to the Kurdish question’. The result was that the Brotherhood and the rump of the declaration group comprised most of the foreign-backed SNC, created in Istanbul in October 2011 (Rasas 2013).

But foreign sponsorship has its price. In late 2011 the exiled SNC was declared by western governments and the Gulf monarchies as the ‘legitimate representative’ of the Syrian people; less than a year later it was unceremoniously dumped in favour of a new exile formation, called the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces or simply the Syrian National Coalition (Al Arabiya 2012). That decision was made in Washington.

The Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), the second largest secular party after the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party (Syrian Region), with its own militia and with branches in Lebanon, remained committed to ‘the stability of the state’. It had re-entered the Syrian Parliament in 2005 and saw itself as at the centre of the reform movement (Haidar, Ali 2013). Commentators suggested there may have been division over support for the government at the branch levels, but SSNP Vice-President for Syria, Safawan Salman, said:

‘We are simultaneously with the stability of the Syrian state and the cohesion of Syrian society, and with profound and extensive reforms. We believe that the stability of Syrian society is necessary for the reforms to succeed’ (Francis 2011).

At the time of the constitutional amendments and parliamentary elections in early 2012, the SSNP remained critical of the former (saying a National Assembly was needed to rewrite the Constitution) and complained about the conduct of the latter; but they did not boycott either (al Akhbar 22 Feb 2012; al Akhbar 15 May 2012); nor did the communist group led by Qadri Jamil. After that election several non-Ba’athists were incorporated into the government, with SSNP President Ali Haidar accepting appointment by President Assad as Minister for Reconciliation, maintaining a dialogue with both the civil opposition and the armed groups.

**Bashar, Demonised outside but Popular Inside Syria**

The popularity of the Syrian President at home undermines attempts to cast him as a monster, at least in Syria. The petro-monarchy of Qatar is an open enemy of Syria, having put literally billions into the Islamist armed groups (Khalaf and Smith 2013). However their own media channel and polls have acknowledged Bashar’s popularity. In January 2011 Qatar’s main media outlet Al Jazeera concluded that a revolution in Syria was ‘unlikely’ due to Assad’s popularity. While there was authoritarian rule, ‘factors such as a relatively popular president and religious diversity make an uprising in the country unlikely’ (Wikstrom 2011). Bashar was popular amongst young people, said US analyst Joshua Landis. ‘They may not like the regime, they don’t like corruption … but they tend to blame this on the people around him, the old guard’. People wanted change, because of poverty, corruption and the political police; but Syrians liked Assad’s support for pluralism and modernising reforms (Wikstrom 2011).

The President’s popularity was shown in the early days, by the huge pro-government rallies that came out in response to opposition rallies. Robert Fisk, one of the few western journalists with a strong sense of Arab history and an eye for detail, but often cynical as regards the Syrian Government, made these observations:

‘Another pro-Assad rally was starting ... it might have reached 200,000 by midday ... there was no Saddam style trucking of the people to Omayad Square [Damascus] ...
the only soldiers were standing with their families. How does one report a pro-gov-
ernment demo during the Arab Awakening? There were veiled women, old men, thou-
sands of children ... were they coerced? I don’t think so’ (Fisk 2011).

Informed critics have observed that the violent conflict in Syria has always been between a pluralist state and sectarian Islamists, backed by the big powers. Iraqi-British analyst Sami Ramadani, a critic of the government, maintains Syria has been run by ‘a ruthless, corrupt regime’ with a feared ‘security apparatus’. However he also says, because ‘reactionary forces’ backed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar very rapidly took over from the ‘democratic resistance’, popular support shifted back to the government (Ramadani 2012). He says the idea that Syria is a sectarian Alawite regime was ‘highly exaggerated’. The government had ‘much wider circles of support’, including influential Sunni classes and ‘millions of women’ who fear the Salafis. Further, many of ‘the poor, the unemployed and students’ who at first backed the protest movement, were repulsed by groups such as the exile Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army, which were ‘dominated by the Brotherhood’ (Ramadani 2012).

Syrian analyst Camille Otrakji suggests President Assad: ‘lost many of his supporters’ in the first year of the violence because he was perceived as a

‘weak leader who could not enforce his will on his security apparatus. Others felt he [was] not effective at mass communication ... [while] some held him personally responsible for the high death toll’ (Otrakji 2012).

In any case, most Syrians were clearly even less happy with the violent insurrection. A Turkish poll in late 2011 showed Syrians to be the ‘least positive’ in the region about the ‘Arab Spring’ events of that year. Only 22% of Syrians thought those events had had a positive effect on their country and 91% opposed (and 5% supported) violent protest (TESEV 2012). Ramadani reconciles these two trends by suggesting that, after the initial movement away from the Government in 2011, ‘popular support shifted back’ when Syrians saw the sectarians and the Saudi-Qatari cabal behind the violence (Ramadani 2012).

In a provisional accounting, Otrakji wrote that the President ‘deserves low marks for failing to fight corruption and for assigning a low priority to reforming Syria’s authoritarian system that he inherited’. There were ‘mixed marks’ for the economy, with benefits for the cities but regression in rural areas. On the other hand, Bashar could be credited with keeping Syria ‘an island of stability’ in a region in flames, having the status and participation of women higher than most other countries of the region, a popular independent foreign policy and a pleasing ‘humility and approachable personality’. While he did not live an austere life, like his father, the outside claims about his own gross corruption were just ‘outlandish’ (Otrakji 2012).

A poll in late 2011, funded by Bashar’s enemies in Qatar and so certainly biased, showed that a majority outside Syria wanted the Syrian President to resign because of ‘the regime’s brutal treatment of protestors’. However, and more importantly, it also showed that 51% of Syrians wanted Assad to stay (Doha Debates 2011). When a poll run by an enemy says this we should take notice. ‘Islamist fighters’ in Aleppo were more emphatic. Three Free Syrian Army leaders (all of whom collaborated with the al Qaeda groups) said the Syrian President had at least ‘70 percent’ support in that mainly Sunni Muslim city (Bayoumy 2013). The local people, ‘all of them, are loyal to the criminal Bashar, they inform on us’ (Abouzeid 2012); they are ‘all informers ... they hate us. They blame us for the destruction’ (Ghaith 2012). Unpopularity is fatal to a revolution; to a religious fanatic it is merely inconvenient. An internal NATO study in 2013 also estimated that 70% of Syrians supported the President, 20% were neutral and 10% supported the ‘rebels’ (World Tribune 2013; BIN 2013). These estimates were not far from the outcome of the 2014 Presidential elections.
Outside Syria the demonisation of Bashar was powerful. The Syrian President was said to have directed a series of appalling civilian massacres. For example, the massacre of more than 100 mostly pro-government villagers at Houla (just outside Homs) was used to expel Syrian diplomats and impose draconian sanctions on the country. That massacre was most likely a ‘false flag’ incident (see Chapter 7).

Despite their anti-Syrian bias, some western sources exposed other ‘false flag’ massacres. For example, the August 2012 massacre of 245 people in Daraya, initially badged as a massacre by ‘Assad’s army’ (Oweis 2012) was exposed by Robert Fisk as a slaughter by the FSA of kidnapped civilian and off-duty soldier hostages, after a failed prisoner swap (Fisk 2012). Similarly, the 10 December 2012 massacre of over 100 villagers in Aqrab was at first blamed on the Syrian Government (Stack and Mourtada 2012). However British journalist Alex Thompson (2012) later reported the FSA had held 500 Alawi villagers for nine days, murdering many of them as the army closed in and the gang fled. The August 2013 chemical weapons incident in East Ghouta was widely blamed on the Assad Government. Yet all independent evidence exposed this as yet another ‘false flag’. (The propaganda surrounding these atrocities is analysed in Chapters 7 and 8).

Quite a number of Syrians have criticised President Assad to me, but not in the manner of the western media. They say they wanted him to be as firm as his father. Many in Syria, at least early in the crisis, regarded him as too soft, leading to the name ‘Mr Soft Heart’. In late 2013, soldiers in Damascus told me there was an Army order to make special efforts to capture alive any Syrian combatant. This is controversial, as many regard Syrian terrorists as traitors, no less guilty than foreign terrorists. What happens to the latter is another story. While there is no credible, independent evidence of attacks on civilians by the Syrian Army there is some video evidence and other anecdotal evidence that the Army has executed captured terrorists. This is certainly a war crime, but probably quite popular in Syria, as most Syrians have family members who have fallen victim to terrorist attacks.

Indeed, a central problem of the demonisation of Bashar by the ‘attacks on civilians’ stories is that these accusations also reflect on the Syrian Arab Army, and that army is extremely popular, including amongst the civil opposition. Syria’s strongest secular traditions is embedded in the Army. With about half a million members, both regulars and conscripts, the army is drawn from all the country’s communities (Suni, Alawi, Shia, Christian, Druze, Kurd, Armenian, Assyrian, etc), which all identify as ‘Syrian’. Remember that the Damascus Declaration of 2005 expressed strong support for the ‘national army’, wanting to remove Ba’athist monopoly control but also to ‘maintain [the army’s] professional spirit’ so as to protect ‘the country’s independence, safeguarding the constitutional system and defending the homeland and the people’. That is, the entire anti-Ba’ath reform movement of 2005 declared itself opposed to attacks on the Army.

The first to break with this position was, of course, the Muslim Brotherhood. They reverted to their traditional aim of seeking an overthrow of the secular state (Al-Shaqfa 2011). A key objective of the Brotherhood’s insurrection was to split the Army along sectarian lines. Indeed, a number of army officers did defect, including many who had family links to the Brotherhood. Islamist atrocities against Alawis and Christians no doubt raised community tensions. However, towards the end of 2011, the FSA-aligned English spokesperson Rami Abdel Rahman admitted that less than 1,000 soldiers had deserted (Atassi 2011). The Syrian Army, often derided by western media as ‘Assad loyalists’, remained quite united, as a national institution. By contrast, the Brotherhood and other Salafi groups relied on sectarianism. They and their foreign, Al Qaeda linked allies, are the key source of the west-
ern-adopted idea of the Assad government as ‘an Alawite regime’, murdering Alawi and Shia civilians, in attempts to incite wider conflict.

The Army is so large that most Syrian communities have strong family links, including with those fallen in the war. During the conflict there have been regular rallies and government backed ceremonies for the families of these martyrs, with thousands proudly displaying photos of their loved ones (IIT 2012; SANA 2015). Further, most of the several million Syrians, displaced by the conflict, have not left the country but rather have moved to other parts under Army protection. This is not really explicable if the Army were indeed engaged in ‘indiscriminate’ attacks on civilians. A repressive army invokes fear and loathing in a population, yet in Damascus one can see that people do not cower as they pass through the many army road blocks, set up to protect against ‘rebel’ car bombs.

Stories of ‘Bashar the monster’ have little traction inside Syria, except as slogans for die-hard anti-government people, because those stories reflect on the army and people have their own personal experience with the army, every day. Those stories seem designed for an external audience. Syrians know that their Army represents pluralist Syria and has been fighting sectarian, foreign backed terrorism. This Army did not fracture on sectarian lines, as the sectarian gangs had hoped, and defections have been small, certainly less than 2%. European Union adviser Kamal Alam puts it this way, ‘for the Syrian Arab Army to operate as long as it has, it has relied on its own people ... there can be no substitute to your own people’s backing’ (Alam 2015).

What then do the polls tell us about the support Bashar al Assad enjoys within Syria? That, of course, is the main issue of substance, when discussing democratic legitimacy. We have several opinion polls, estimates from Syrian and foreign analysts and the Presidential poll of June 2014. Great care needs to be taken with polls, in context of a war where legitimacy has become a major battle ground. As outlined in Chapter 1, conventional ethical notions of avoiding conflicts of interest, searching for independent evidence and disqualifying self-serving claims from belligerent parties have been ignored in much of the international debate over Syria. At the same time, we have to consider a wide range of sources.

Some polls should clearly be excluded, like that of the International Republican Institute, jointly run with Pechter Polls, and funded by the US Congress (IRI 2012). This survey focused on foreign intervention. It concluded that ‘members of the Syrian opposition support international armed intervention in their country, including establishing a “no-fly” zone, humanitarian corridors and training Free Syrian Army fighters, but they do not support an international presence on the ground’ (Dougherty 2012). This poll is forensically worthless, as regards the views of the Syrian opposition because it rejects a random poll in favour of a ‘snowball’ method of polling. At least IRI/Pechter state the biased method fairly clearly.

‘Key individuals (or channels) were used to initiate the referral chain, ultimately reaching a sample of 1,168 opposition members, approximately 315 of whom were inside Syria. Margin of error is not strictly applicable to this survey because of the non-random selection of respondents’ (IRI 2012).

In other words, the political associates of the IRI asked their friends, they asked theirs and 73% of the whole sample did not live in Syria. We have no idea what fraction of the ‘Syrian Opposition’ this might represent. More importantly, it says precisely nothing about broader Syrian public opinion.

Syrian electoral processes during the crisis, and public participation in them, have been important. President Assad was addressing some of the key reform demands when he signed
decree law 101 in August 2011, amending the electoral law. Then his government prepared constitutional amendments which would remove the Socialist Ba’ath Party’s state-embedded character and allowing for competitive presidential elections. This passed by a referendum in late February 2012. Civil opposition groups like the SSNP and the communists opposed both the process (they wanted an elected constituent assembly to propose the changes) and some elements of the changes, but did not boycott the vote (al Akhbar 22 Feb 2012; al Akhbar 15 May 2012). The armed Islamist groups boycotted the referendum and the National Assembly elections of early 2012, threatening to attack those who participated.

That electoral reform led to the registration of six new parties, in addition to the previously existing eight parties, while formally removing the privileged status of the Ba’ath Party (As Safir 2012). Voter turnout for Syria’s parliamentary elections of May 2012 was low at 51.26%, down from 56% in 2007 (International IDEA 2015). This was in part due to threats from the armed groups. The Farouq Brigade (FSA), at that time being expelled from the city of Homs by the Syrian Army, was the main group making those threats. Farouq was subsequently named by many witnesses as responsible for the killing of civilians in the village of Houla, 18 days after the elections. Some at Houla had participated in those elections (see Chapter 7). The other factor for a low turnout is the relatively low importance given to parliamentary elections in presidential systems.

The outcomes of the 2012 National Assembly elections were 150 seats for the Ba’ath Party and 90 for independents in the 250 seat parliament. Prominent among the non-Baathist MPs were Ahmad Kousa of the Syrian Democratic Party, Qadri Jamil and Ali Haidar of the Front for Change and Liberation, and Amro Osi from the Initiative of Syrian Kurds (Landis 2012). The composition of the parliament was additionally important because a new constitutional condition for the Presidential elections was that each candidate had to secure the support of at least 35 MPs, and each MP could only support one presidential candidate. Presidential candidates were also required to have lived in Syria for the previous 10 years, which ruled out exile candidates (As Safir 2012).

The Presidential elections of 2014, for the first time in decades, presented the Ba’ath Party candidate with a competitive election. Elections before then had been plebiscites on the official candidate. Of course, more than four decades of Ba’ath Party rule along with wartime conditions did mean that Bashar had had a very strong advantage. He was far better known, identified with the state and genuinely popular. In the lead up to the presidential elections Syrian analyst Dr. Taleb Ibrahim coincided with the earlier NATO consultant in an estimate that Bashar’s support would be around 70% (Ibrahim 2014).

The fact that many western nations declared Syria’s elections ‘fixed’, before they were held, hardly carries much credibility. These were the same governments trying to overthrow the Syrian Government (Herring 2014). The Washington-run Voice of America falsely claimed that Syria ‘would not permit international observers’ (VOA 2014). In fact, over a hundred election observers came from India, Brazil, Russia, China, South Africa, Iran and Latin America, along with non-official observers from the USA and Canada (KNN 2014; Bartlett 2014).

While seven candidates were nominated, only three eventually qualified, apparently because not all could gain the support of 35 MPs. Businessman Hassan al-Nouri (a former Assad government minister) and Aleppo Communist MP Maher Hajjar stood against Bashar (al Saadi 2014; Harbi 2014). They agreed with the incumbent on national unity, support for the Army and the struggle against terrorism, differing mainly on economic policy (Harbi 2014; Baker 2014). The second largest secular party, the SSNP, supported Bashar.
The international media recognised the massive turnout, both in Syria and from the refugees in Lebanon, with some sources grudgingly admitting that ‘getting people to turn out in large numbers, especially outside Syria, is a huge victory in and of itself’ (Dark 2014). Associated Press reported on crowds of tens of thousands, in a ‘carnival like atmosphere’ in Damascus and Latakia, with ‘long lines’ of voters in Homs (FNA 2014a). AP noted thousands of exile voters ‘clogging entrances to the Lebanese capital’, along with the dominance of Assad voters in Sweden. They concluded that President Assad had ‘maintained significant support among large sections of the population’ (FNA 2014b). Indeed, the 73.4% participation rate in Syria’s 2014 Presidential election was far higher than any presidential election in the USA in recent decades, where participation rates range between 52% and 60% (Idea International 2015a, 2015b).

Bashar al Assad won this election convincingly, with 88.7% of the vote (AP 2014). Hassan al Nouri and Maher Hajjar gained 4.3% and 3.2% respectively (Aji 2014). With a 73.4% turnout (or 11.6 million of the 15.8 million eligible voters), that meant he had 10.3 million votes or 64% of all eligible voters. Even if every single person who was unable to vote was against him, this was a convincing mandate. Washington complained of the wartime conditions, but were happy to endorse the polls in Afghanistan and Ukraine, both plagued by war and corruption. Associated Press reasonably concluded that Assad’s support was not just from minorities, but had to do with his legacy of opening up the economy, his support for women, the real benefits in education, health and electricity and, last but not least, the President’s capacity to move decisively against the sectarian armed groups (AP 2014).

The June 2014 presidential elections were the most authoritative indication of support for Bashar al Assad. Even though the great institutional advantage of the incumbent made this more of a hybrid of plebiscite and election, his support in the first competitive presidential elections in decades was clear and fairly consistent with other estimates. These are shown in the table below. I have included estimates which come from Bashar’s enemies in Qatar and NATO.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poll question</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Poll host</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revolution in Syria “unlikely due to Assad’s popularity”</td>
<td>Feb 2011</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>Wikstrom Feb 2011 in Al Jazeera (Qatar)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91% opposed violent protest against government (5% supported it)</td>
<td>Late 2011</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>TESEV (2012) poll (Turkey) of Syrians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should Assad stay?</td>
<td>Dec 2011</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>Doha Debates poll (Qatar)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constitutional change poll</td>
<td>Feb 2012</td>
<td>Passed</td>
<td>Syrian Govt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary elections (Ba’ath Party result) on a 51% turnout</td>
<td>May 2012</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>Syrian Govt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bashar support in Aleppo?</td>
<td>Mid 2012</td>
<td>70%+</td>
<td>3 FSA leaders in Aleppo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National support for Bashar?</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>NATO consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National support for Bashar?</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>Syrian Dr Taleb Ibrahim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential elections (Bashar vote) on a 73.4% turnout (of all eligible)</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
<td>88% (64%)</td>
<td>Syrian Govt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We see significant concordance between agencies of the partisan or enemy sources, those linked to the anti-Government armed groups, and Syrian electoral processes. The election results were relatively consistent with informed opinion during the crisis. The
Syrian President enjoys more than two-thirds popular support in the country. This reality is not really challenged by Bashar’s institutional advantage. Support for the Syrian Army is probably higher than that for the President, while that for the Ba’ath Party is lower. The combined data confirms the idea that a range of non-Ba’ath parties and social forces rallied to the President during the crisis.

We can see from the earlier reform statements (in particular the 2005 Damascus Declaration) the reasons why most of the domestic opposition did not join in armed attacks on the state. Most of them backed the state, against the foreign-backed sectarian terrorism. The major exception to this was the Muslim Brotherhood and other smaller Salafi groups. They were not concerned about any sort of democracy, looking instead for their own version of a religious state. For that, once again, they needed and sought foreign military assistance.

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37- THE DIRTY WAR ON SYRIA -37


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An intelligent observer might ask, what is the origin of these vicious and sectarian, head-chopping fanatics, who seem to be on some sort of Islamic mission and also often appear on the same side as the big powers? The answer to this does not lie in the religion of Islam but in two particular historical phenomena: Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabis and the more widespread and well-organised Muslim Brotherhood.

Wahhabism is based on a feudal network of Gulf monarchies, led by Saudi Arabia, while the Muslim Brotherhood, which began in Egypt, has its own history of jealous competition with secular nationalism. This ‘Brotherhood’ has developed Salafi-sectarian views, similar to the Wahhabi states which often fund it, and those views limit its popularity in the generally tolerant Arab and Muslim world.

Aggravating this weakness, both Wahhabism and the Brotherhood have long histories of collaboration with the big powers, against their domestic opponents. They are the people who have degraded the idea of ‘jihad’, a perfectly respectable concept in Islam meaning a righteous and spiritual struggle, into the vision of ugly ‘jihadis’ committing monstrous crimes. These are the ones who carry out public atrocities, while claiming to represent orthodox Sunni Muslims. In fact, they no more represent Sunni Muslims than the racist killers of North America, the Klu Klux Klan, represent Christianity.

The fanatical and sectarian history of Wahhabis and the Muslim Brotherhood undermines any idea that this type of political Islam might contribute to national democracy, regional stability, neighbourly cooperation or human development.

The two currents cooperate with each other, but also have important elements of competition. For example, at the start of the insurrection in Syria the tiny petro-monarchy of Qatar began as the financier of the Muslim Brotherhood linked Islamists of the Free Syrian Army. However the Saudi royal family has never trusted the Brotherhood, as its broad organisation represents potential competition and therefore a threat to the power of largest Gulf monarchy (Zambelis 2013; Yigit 2014). The Saudis therefore have preferred to back a range of disparate and dependent internationalised Salafi groups (i.e. with little real local social support base), at some distance from the Brotherhood, like the al Qaeda groups Jabhat al Nusra, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL-Daesh) and the Islamic Front. Qatar as the minor partner eventually had to fall in line (Pandey 2014). In 2015 the Saudis and the Turkish Government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan then rebadged some of these groups, led by Jabhat al Nusra, into the ‘Army of Conquest’ (Jaysh al Fateh) (Mezzofiore 2015; MEC 2015). Smaller groups have proliferated in the search for money and arms from foreign sponsors.
This chapter gives an account of the sectarian history of Wahhabism and the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East, and how and why they came to collaborate so closely with the big powers. It then briefly charts their insurrections in Syria.

**Imperialism, Wahhabis and the Brotherhood**

Islam is strongly community oriented and socially inclusive, recognising plurality and urging tolerance. The Holy Quran stresses mercy and abjures abuse of other groups (Quran 49:11), while urging cooperation amongst diverse groups of believers (Quran 5:69, 5:48). However there is no centralised authority and small but influential sectarian variants have developed, over the centuries. Despite this, tolerance and ‘secularism’, in the sense of political governance not tied to particular religious doctrine, have been widespread in the Middle East. Baktiari and Norton (2005) cite contemporary and influential Egyptian, Syrian and Iranian writers who, in different ways, promote tolerance and diversity, without renouncing Islamic identity. Yet the Syrian writer Muhammed Shahrur equates the ‘caliphate’ of the Ottoman Empire as a ‘despotism’ which Mustafa Kemal Ataturk managed to overthrow (Baktiari and Norton 2005: 39). That empire was a political phenomenon, not a religious project.

Despotism and sectarianism are overwhelmingly political creations, rather than expressions of religious values. Carroll pointed out that, while Islam is ‘one of the most powerful sources of Arab political identities’, its impact on political community formation depends on particular ‘geopolitical conditions’ (Carroll 1986: 186). Similarly, Ayoob has written of Islamism as ‘a political ideology and not a theological construct’. It varies from region to region, depending on the social environment and external forces (Ayoob 1979: 535).

While the history and social environment of Islamism varies considerably, the Middle East does have some common ‘external forces’. First amongst these is the role of the hegemonic powers, including former colonial powers. The last century has seen constant engagement by these powers, in concerted efforts to dominate the oil and gas rich region. Big power support for the state of Israel is another conditioning factor. Ayoob points out: ‘unless the contribution of these critical external factors to the growth in Islamism’s popular appeal is recognised, it will not be possible fully to comprehend this phenomenon’ (Ayoob 2005: 960-961).

Except for the Iranian variant, ‘Political Islam’ as developed in the Middle East revolves around two influential currents: Wahhabism and the Muslim Brotherhood. The Islamism developed in contemporary Iran has two important historical differences. In the first place, Iran’s secular nationalism was effectively crushed by a US backed coup in the 1950s, and by the subsequent quarter century of repression under the Shah, a dictatorial monarch. This US-backed dictatorship, mixed with elements of western culture, was thus the experience of a full generation. Resistance was mostly organised through the mosques and (despite the communist contributions) Islamic conceptualisation was central to the expulsion of the Shah and of US influence. The Islamic Republic of Iran thus developed as a popular anti-imperial force (see Ayoob 1979: 543), unlike the Muslim Brotherhood which drew on foreign assistance in its attempts to depose indigenous secular nationalism.

Both Egypt and Syria have built and maintain, to this day, secular nationalist regimes with strong traditions of anti-imperialism. This axis was weakened when a collaboration between the Egyptian Government and the US and Israel began in the late 1970s, but Syria maintained its foreign policy independence. The current alliance between Iran and Syria has much to do with a common anti-imperialism. It is hardly a coincidence that these two are the only countries of the region not to host US military bases, and are thus both subject to intense ‘regime change’ pressures. Iran’s second distinction is in having an overwhelming
majority (around 90%) of Shia Muslims. So while apostasy is a contentious issue in Iran’s Islamic Republic, that republic must be seen in context of a near religious monoculture at home, along with a sensitivity to the position of Shia minorities in regional countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Syria and Egypt. With the exception of the Baha’is, who are seen as fifth columnists for Israel, minorities have generally been treated well in Iran. Importantly, there seems no Iranian Shia equivalent of the Wahhabi-Salafi doctrine of ‘takfir’, where people may be denounced and attacked simply for having a different faith.

For the above reasons, I suggest, a different set of considerations must apply when considering Political Islam in Iran. On the other hand, a common Salafi network exists in Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and many of the Gulf states, coordinated for almost a century by a mostly underground group known as the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan: the brothers). Because this network does indeed represent an intolerant Salafi current within Sunni Islam, it links with the Saudi current of Wahhabism and has been engaged in big power collaboration for most of its existence. The relationship between western hegemony and the most intolerant of all Muslim sects may not at first glance seem apparent, so a little more history is called for.

The British were the modern experts of imperial rule, but they learned lessons from the Romans, putting divisive forces to work, at first in India, then in the Middle East. ‘Divide et empera [Divide and rule] was the old Roman motto’ wrote Lord William Elphinston in 1859, to an inquiry set up to investigate a mid-nineteenth century armed rebellion, ‘and it should be ours’ (in Desai 1948: 354). After that rebellion Sir John Lawrence reorganised the Bengal Army into a variety of ethnically diverse regiments (Mehta and Patwardhan 1942: 57). Similarly, British Secretary of State Charles Wood wrote in an 1862 letter to Governor General of India, Lord Elgin: ‘We have maintained our power in India by playing one part against the other and we must continue to do so. Do all you can, therefore, to prevent all having a common feeling’ he directed (Wood 1862; Pande 1987).

This campaign of divide and rule would extend into emphasising ethnic divisions in school curricula. Secretary of State Viscount Cross wrote to the colonial Viceroy Dufferin in 1887:

‘This division of religious feeling is greatly to our advantage and I look forward for some good as a result of your Committee of Inquiry on Indian Education and on teaching material’ (in Pande 1987).

After the formation of a unified anti-colonial front, the Indian National Congress, British administrators searched for ways to divide it. So Secretary of State, George Francis Hamilton, wrote to Governor General Lord Curzon:

‘If we could break the educated Hindu party [Congress] into two sections holding widely different views we should, by such a division, strengthen our position against the subtle and continuous attack which the spread of education must make upon our system of government’ (Hamilton in Curzon 1899: Sept 20).

He knew the British Empire was unviable against a united people.

By the early 20th century K.B. Krishna (1939) noted that ‘divide and rule’ was practised widely across the British Empire: including in Ceylon, Ireland, Palestine and Kenya. He described the fomenting of ‘communalism’ as a key element of British administrative policy toward India; yet he argued that the struggle for national independence required complete opposition to this ‘communalism’ (Desai 1948).

After World War One and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, British administrators looked for likely divisive collaborators in the Arab world. First in their sights was the Saud
family, with their highly sectarian doctrine of Wahhabism. The Saudis both horrified and fascinated the British. Winston Churchill wrote that King Ibn Saud’s Wahhabis:

‘hold it as an article of duty, as well as of faith, to kill all those who do not share their opinions and to make slaves of their wives and children. Women have been put to death in Wahhabi villages for simply appearing in the street’ (Churchill 1921).

Nevertheless, Churchill would later write: ‘my admiration for [Ibn Saud] was deep, because of his unfailing loyalty to us’ (Churchill 1953). A British Government memo from the mid-1940s noted that ‘Ibn Saud’s influence in the Middle East is very great, and it has been used consistently for a number of years in support of our policy’ (Wikeley 1945; see also Sheikh 2007: 47). When Egyptian President Nasser emerged in the 1950s as the hero of Arab nationalism – having nationalised the Suez Canal and defeated a planned British and French invasion – Washington began to take an interest in the Saudi royal family. US President Eisenhower was said to be looking for: ‘a high class Machiavellian plan to split the Arabs and defeat the aims of our enemies [the Soviet Union] … building up King Saud as a counterweight to Nasser’. Eisenhower said: ‘The King could be built up, possibly as a spiritual leader. Once this was accomplished, we might begin to urge his right to political leadership’ (in Curtis 2012, 62, 68). The close US-Saudi relationship, to this day, is not simply that of global power and oil baron, but rather that of the great power with a principal political collaborator in the region, and one with a long record of fomenting division.

The other regional collaborator was less reliable but had a wider, popular network. The Muslim Brotherhood was formed by Hassan al Banna in Egypt in the 1920s. At first the Brotherhood opposed British influence. They wanted independence, but their narrow Salafist views drew them into competition with Arab nationalism, which was more inclusive and far more popular. From this competition it was soon seen that the followers of al-Banna, ‘instead of railing against non-Muslim and Western colonial or imperialist powers’ began to ‘denounce the Muslim rulers’ (Butterworth 1992: 35).

The British initially tried to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood, during World War 2; but pro-British monarch King Farouk began to fund the Brotherhood in 1940. Farouk was said to have seen the Brotherhood ‘as a useful counter to the power of … the secular, nationalist Wafd Party’ (Curtis 2012: 24). In 1941 British intelligence regarded the MB as ‘the most serious danger to public security’ in Egypt (in Lia 1998: 181); yet by 1942 ‘Britain had definitely begun to finance the Brotherhood’ (Curtis 2012: 24). They sought to further divide the group. The British agreed ‘an effort would be made to create a schism in the party by exploiting any differences which might occur between Hassan al Banna and Ahmed al-Sukkari’ (British Embassy Cairo, 1942).

The CIA was said to have been backing the Muslim Brotherhood, while the Saudis funded it, by the end of the 1950s. The Saudis liked the Brotherhood’s ‘ultra-conservative politics and its virulent hatred of Arab communists’ (Draitser 2012). The two currents were different but found many points of convergence. While Wahhabism had begun in an openly sectarian way, the Muslim Brotherhood began as a reaction to European domination and cultural invasion (Commins 2009: 140-141). Yet both aimed to create a community of believers. Covert relations between the foreign powers, the Wahhabis and the Brotherhood set the terms for collaborations across the region.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt had a history which ran from political negotiations to assassinations and sectarian attacks. The group was banned and many imprisoned under almost all regimes. In the late 1970s, when Muslim Brotherhood linked militants assassinated Egypt’s President Anwar al-Sadat, there was further repression of the group and a
public debate ensued over the legitimacy of attacks on ‘apostates’. A justification of the assassination was written by Abd al-Salam Faraj, arguing that Muslims had neglected ‘at their peril’ the imperative of the holy struggle (jihad), and the battle against apostasy. In the Salafi-Takfiri tradition he argued that the violent overthrow of apostate regimes was ‘the only path to guarantee the establishment of a truly Islamic state’ (Akhavi 1992: 95). In a subsequent denunciation and fatwa against this tract, Egypt’s leading cleric, Mufti Ali Jadd al-Haqq, acknowledged the Quranic references relied on by Faraj but drew attention to 124 other verses ‘that counsel patience or abjuring armed conflict with the non-Muslims in a spirit of peaceful persuasion’ (Akhavi 1992: 95-97). None of this seems to have much influenced the tactics of the Brotherhood, still less the foreign powers.

By the mid-1980s Washington and London, in efforts to dislodge Soviet troops in Afghanistan, were funding the most vicious of sectarian Islamists, including many well known for atrocities against civilians. The Afghan and Pakistani sectarians came from the Deobandi sect, similar in doctrine and intolerance to the Salafis of the Gulf. Hadji Abdul Haq, who admitted bombing a civilian aircraft in 1984, was received as a ‘freedom fighter’ in 1986 by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan (Curtis 2012: 145). Millions in US aid went to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, famous for throwing acid in women’s faces, skinning his opponents alive and slaughtering rival groups. Hekmatyar worked closely with Osama bin Laden and visited British officials in London in 1986 and 1988 (Keddie 2006: 118; Curtis 2012: 146). He remains linked to the US-backed Afghan regime. Saudi Osama bin Laden enjoyed US support in the 1980s but fell out with Washington over US military bases in Saudi Arabia. He organised several attacks on US targets in the region and was suspected (but never charged) of masterminding the September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York, which killed three thousand people. Bin Laden’s 2011 obituary in the New York Times refers to: ‘Freedom fighter Osama bin Laden in 1989 … building his terrorism network, with American help’ (Zernike and Kaufman 2011).

The Muslim Brotherhood had a broad social base but, at a practical level, its political economic program remained far from the mix of democratic and socialist ideas adopted by most Arab nationalists. The Brotherhood was dominated by middle level merchant and landowning classes, and combined charitable relations reaching across classes. It functioned ‘like a parallel society: richer members provide poorer members with food, medicine and clothing through financial donations’ (Hansen 2012). In Egypt as in Syria it reinforced private property and private enterprise relations, consistent with the economic agenda of its occasional western patrons. Magda Kandil of the Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies said of the Egyptian Brotherhood: ‘It’s very easy to confuse their economic platform with that of the previous (military) regime: private-led growth, free market economy, scaling down the role of government, empowering the private sector’, she says. ‘The big difference is which private sector you are talking about’ (Hansen 2012).

The Brotherhood claims to represent all Sunni Muslims, but it certainly does not. By the 1980s in Sunni dominated Palestine, for example, the Brotherhood’s political strategy (as in Egypt) was a primary phase of transforming the Palestinians into an Islamic society, and a second stage of waging a holy struggle against Israel. This meant that nationalist Palestinians were targeted before the occupying power. Yet while Palestinian society is quite religious, polls showed that 90% of the Palestinian population preferred the PLO’s unified nationalist agenda (Shadid 1988: 677-680). Even other Sunni Islamist groups, such as Islamic Jihad, stayed within the PLO and maintained strong relations across Sunni-Shia lines, including with Hezbollah and Iran (Shadid 1988: 677). Israel, for its part, was well aware of the Brotherhood strategy and regarded such internal division as an asset. It saw that ‘any success by the Brotherhood would be at the expense of the nationalists [PLO];
consequently the latter will be weakened’. One result was that ‘the Brotherhood is treated less harshly [by the Israelis] than the nationalists’ (Shadid 1988: 674-675).

Islamists can point to opinion polls which show strong support for Islamic law in the region. Strong majorities in many countries (e.g. 74% in Egypt, 89% in the Palestinian territories) support sharia to be ‘the official law of the land’. However those same polls show similarly strong majorities supporting freedom of religion for people of other faiths. That is quite at odds with the vicious and sectarian ‘takfiri’ idea of the Salafis. This effective anti-Salafism is said to be partly due to the idea that sharia only applies to Muslims, partly because of widely varying views of what sharia law means and partly due to differences over what role religious leaders should play in politics (Pew Research Centre 2013: 9).

Strong majorities of Muslims in most countries (e.g. 67% in Egypt, 67% in Tunisia, 68% in Iraq) are concerned about extremist groups, and particularly about Islamic extremists (Pew Research Centre 2013: 11). A 2015 poll showed few Palestinians had sympathy for the Salafist movements (including ISIS) which had sprung up in Gaza. The JMCC poll showed that 3.8% of Palestinians were ‘very sympathetic’, 17.8% ‘moderately sympathetic and 64.9% ‘unsympathetic’ (71.1% unsympathetic in Gaza) to these extreme sectarians (JMCC 2015). All this demonstrates that Salafi-style attacks on unbelievers have little support amongst Muslims.

Nevertheless, the sectarianism of the Brotherhood has worried minorities – all non-Salafi Muslims (most Sunni, as well as Shi’ia and Alawi), Christians, Druze and others – from the beginning. Minorities have long felt themselves in a ‘precarious’ position in face of the Muslim Brotherhood’s discriminatory and threatening approach (Hourani 1947: 21-25).

Recognising the influence of sectarianism, the imperial powers have made occasional alliances with the Brotherhood as it is the ‘oldest, largest and most influential Islamist organisation’. It is obvious to them that the Brotherhood has much ugly sectarianism but, what has been considered important from the US perspective is that ‘there is a current within the Brotherhood willing to engage with the United States’. Perhaps to make the relationship more palatable, it is argued or imagined that ‘this current … has pushed much of the Brotherhood towards moderation’ (Leiken and Brooke 2007: 107). ‘Policymakers should recognise that the Muslim Brotherhood represents a notable opportunity’. This approach speaks of ‘divide and engage’, and to adopt a ‘case by case’ approach to engagement with Brotherhood Islamists (Leiken and Brooke 2007: 121). It also demonstrates the ongoing appeal of the Brotherhood to hegemonic strategy.

The Empire’s Jihadis in Syria

When the ‘Arab Spring’ erupted in Tunisia, then Egypt and Libya, Salafi groups and the Muslim Brotherhood became the beneficiaries of change. Syria saw yet another armed Islamist insurrection, under cover of political reform protests.

The idea of a ‘moderate’ Muslim Brotherhood, at odds with violent jihadis, has some traction in western writing (e.g. Leiken and Brooke 2007: 107), but little grounding in Syrian experience. Indeed, the extreme ‘takfiri’ ideas, where those of other faiths can be attacked and killed (al-Amin 2012) have been part of Brotherhood doctrine in Syria at least since the late 1970s. These ideas were encouraged by the Saudi-Wahhabbi sponsors of Syria’s 2011 insurrection, and seem to have become well embedded in most of the armed groups. Despite some reshuffles, within a very short time the leadership of both the exile political leadership of the ‘revolution’ and the Supreme Military Council of the ‘Free Syrian Army’ were firmly in the hands of Salafi groups, dominated by the Brotherhood (Barkan 2013: 5).
What is distinct about Syria’s Muslim Brotherhood? It has its own history and characteristics, though all its public positions have been closely aligned with those of the Egyptian Brotherhood, including the brief Brotherhood-led government in Cairo (Draitser 2012). It came to Syria from Egypt and developed a parliamentary movement in the late 1940s yet, by the 1960s it had begun to attack the Alawi leaders in the Ba‘ath Party as heretics who could not represent Muslims. From then on the Brotherhood began to engage in battles with the secular government (Teitelbaum 2004: 135, 154).

The Brotherhood put its representatives forward as ‘the natural spokesmen of the Sunni community’ and tried to characterise its conflict with the Ba‘thist Government as ‘a conflict between Sunnis and Alawis’ (Batatu 1982: 13). Nevertheless, according to Batatu, it was never the religious beliefs of the Sunnis which were under threat from the Ba‘athists, but rather that ‘the social interests of the upper and middle elements of their landed, mercantile and manufacturing classes’ saw advantage in the Brotherhood (Batatu 1982: 13). The Brotherhood’s program, like that of the mother party in Egypt, emphasised liberal freedoms and the transfer of state enterprises to private hands, consistent with ‘the outlook and interests of the urban Sunni trading and manufacturing classes’ (Batatu 1982: 13-14). Arab and Syrian secularists favoured a strong state sector.

The Brotherhood had been marginalised in the early 1960s, when there was a brief union between Egypt and Syria (the United Arab Republic); a union with a charter which contained ‘a baffling combination of … [ideas] in addition to nationalist and religious sentiments – Marxian socialism, side by side with Egyptian revolutionism, Arab nationalism with internationalism, secular politics with Islamic precepts’ (Najjar 1968: 184). Yet Islam was not declared the state religion in the charter of the UAR (Parker 1962: 19), nor would it enter the Syrian constitution. The UAR collapsed after a short time.

Hafez al Assad, who came to the Syrian Presidency in 1971, kept Islam out of Syria’s constitution but agreed to a compromise with Brotherhood leaders where the head of state had to be a Muslim. In 1972 he got a senior Iraqi Shi‘ia cleric to recognise Alawis as a branch of the Shi‘ite community. Despite this, the Brotherhood went on to consider Hafez and the Alawis as non-Muslims (Talhamy 2009: 566-7). The Baathist Government embedded in the Syrian state a type of ecumenical pluralism in which all religions would be recognised, that is, all creeds of Muslims, Christians, Druze and others. This system was supervised by a Grand Mufti, a leading and respected Muslim scholar, and a Minister for Religious Heritage.

The Brotherhood’s opposition to the Baathist government and its religious pluralism became more violent in the late 1970s (Batatu 1982: 19-20). Despite their narrow doctrine they were said to have been inspired by the ‘Iranian Islamic Revolution’ of 1979, even though it was Shi‘ia Muslim, and sought Iran’s help against secular Syria. However they received no response at all from Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhullah al-Khomeini (Batatu 1982: 13). Shortly after this Sa‘id Hawwa, the Syrian Brotherhood’s chief ideologist, ‘stressed that the people of the Sunna are the real Muslim community, thus widening the gap between the Muslim Brothers and Iran’ (Talhamy 2009: 570; Batatu 1982:13). This anti-Shia stance linked to the Wahhabi theory of a Iran-Syria-Hezbollah Shia ‘threat’, which was attempting ‘to stir up fears … of a possible Shiite takeover of Syria and other Sunni states’ (Talhamy 2009: 579).

With the Ba‘th system well entrenched, the Brotherhood banned for its violent attacks and with President Hafez al Assad showing few additional concessions, the sectarian network began a series of bloody insurrectionary moves. The group’s takfiri thinking was demonstrated in 1979 when it launched a series of attacks on Alawis, as well as govern-
ment officials, including the massacre of several dozen young Alawi cadets at an Aleppo military school (Seale 1988: 325). The government jailed and executed many Brotherhood members, accusing the group of being subservient to Israel and the US. In April 1980 armed clashes in Aleppo left more than a thousand dead (Seale 1988: 328; Talhamy 2009: 567). (For details on the failed final insurrection in Hama, see Chapter 4).

The rise in 2011 of a ‘Free Syrian Army’ (FSA) – never a centrally commanded army but rather a number of groups loosely coordinated through funders and arms suppliers – was wrongly presented in most western accounts as an organic development from the civilian protest marches, in combination with local self-defence committees. It was, in many respects, a revival of the Brotherhood’s great failure in Hama, 29 years earlier. However in 2011 the Salafi-jihadi role was played down outside Syria and, when it was acknowledged, there were attempts to blame sectarianism on the Government. One US analyst asserted:

‘The Syrian conflict began as a secular revolt against autocracy. Yet as the conflict pro-tracts ... [there is] a small but growing jihadist presence inside Syria ... [President] Assad has used the threat of jihadists within the opposition to build support for the regime’ (O’Bagy 2012).

Similarly, another US report from 2012 claims:

‘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 with-in the FSA are pious rather than Islamists and are not motivated by sectarianism’ (Benotman and Naseraldin 2012: 1).

Nevertheless, the latter report goes onto categorise the following FSA groups as ‘jihadis’, on the basis of their aim to establish an Islamic state: Jabhat al-Nusra (al Nusra Front), Liwaa’ al-Ummah (Brigade of the Nation), Sukur al-Sham (Falcons of the Levant), al-Dawla al-Islamiyya (the Islamic state) and Ahrar al-Sham (Benotman and Naseraldin 2012: 2).

Who were these ‘vast majority’ secular nationalists? The US-aligned International Crisis Group (ICG 2012), noting that ‘the presence of a powerful Salafi strand among Syria’s rebels has become irrefutable’, spoke of ‘a moderate Islamic tradition’ and suggested that two groups which ‘have yet to develop a firm ideology’ might be secular: the Farouq Brigade and the Khalid bin Walid brigade, both based in Homs (ICG 2012: i, 6; also Abouzeid 2012). They were, in fact, the main forces which seized part of the old city of Homs, over 2011-2012. The Farouq Brigade grew to become the largest single rebel group up to that point in the conflict (Holliday 2012: 21-22). The Wall Street Journal called the Farouq Brigade ‘pious Sunnis’ rather than Islamists (Malas 2013). In their English language media statements they distanced themselves from al Qaeda linked groups, so as not to alienate western support; but in Syria they wear al Qaeda-style black shahada headbands and often salafi-style beards (Channel4News 2012). The BBC called Farouq ‘moderately Islamist’, suggesting they exaggerate their Islamism ‘to attract financial support from the Gulf’ (Marcus 2013).

This moderate image was perhaps wishful thinking. Mortada observes that, ‘most of the al-Farouq Battalion’s members are Salafis, armed and funded by Saudi Arabia while ‘Khalid Ibn al-Walid Battalion is loyal to and supported by the Muslim Brotherhood’ (Mortada 2012). In early April, the Farouq Battalion was accused of collecting Jizyah, or taxes imposed on non-Muslims living under Muslim rule, in Christian areas of Homs province (Al-Haqiqah 2012; Holliday 2012: 27). Residents of Homs heard Farouq chanting the genocidal slogans ‘Christians to Beirut, Alawis to the grave’ (Blanford 2011). Sources in the Christian Orthodox Church then accused Farouq of the large scale ethnic cleansing of tens
of thousands of Christians in Homs by early 2012 (Agenzia Fides 2012). Farouq has been
defended by foreign sympathisers, some of whom said the Christians who left Homs did so just because of the fighting (Al Tamimi 2012).

This might be more credible if the Muslim population had left in similar numbers; but it did not. Farouq is credibly blamed for blowing up a hospital in Qusayr, to the Islamist chants of ‘Allahu Akhbar’ (Oxnevvg3n22, Youtube 2012); supporters posted the same footage online, blaming this bombing on ‘the regime’ (SyrianDaysOfRage 2012). Yet the Syrian Army generally does not engage in Islamist chants. It was a former Farouk commander, Khalid al Hamad, who was infamously shown on video trying to eat a dead Syrian soldier’s heart (Greenfield 2013b). The Khalid Ibn al-Walid group is believed responsible for the use of a child to behead prisoners in Homs (HRI 2012). These are hardly ‘moderate rebels’.

There were a number of other salafi-jihadi groups in the early months – such as Umar al-Khattab, Ali Ibn bi-Taleb, Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Rijal Allah, the Ali Ibn Abi-Taleb Brigade, Reef Dimashq Martyrs, al-Radeef al-Thawri (Mortada 2012), and various foreign Salafi and Deobandi groups, including the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and the Pakistani Taliban. It is notable that none of the proponents of the ‘secular FSA’ theory seem able to name any particular groups. In 2013 the New York Times admitted that ‘nowhere in rebel-controlled Syria is there a secular fighting force to speak of’ (Hubbard 2013).

A distinct feature of the Syrian conflict has been the very large scale participation of foreign Salafi-jihadis, particularly from 2012 onwards, from a range of countries including Saudi Arabia, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, Iraq, Chechnya (Russian Federation), Pakistan and various parts of Europe (Komireddi 2012, Gertz 2013, Kern 2013). This factor emphasised the fact that the conflict was not simply a national one or a ‘civil war’. The Salafi and Brotherhood forces were able to prolong their attacks because of the participation of thousands of outside fighters, most often paid by Qatar and Saudi Arabia and trained in Jordan and Turkey (Draitser 2013). Indeed, the Syrian Islamists had been effectively defeated by early 2012; but they were reinforced by many thousands of foreign jihadists, most of them passing through Turkey.

In this dirty war the foreign powers have not been direct belligerents, mostly acting as funders, trainers and arms suppliers to their proxy Islamist armies. The US, Britain and France at first led a diplomatic offensive, attempting to isolate the Syrian government and to impose successive non-elected exile groups as the ‘legitimate representatives’ of the Syrian people (Barkan 2013). Nevertheless, along with regional collaborators, particularly Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, they funded and armed all the various armed groups. Turkey provided training grounds and a staging post for attacks on northern Syria (Edmonds 2013). Qatar funded the Brotherhood and provided arms through Turkey, recruiting foreign fighters, for example from Yemen, to be trained by US Special Forces in Qatar before being sent to Syria (Al Alam 2013a). Saudi Arabia, which armed the insurrection from its beginning in March 2011, backed various foreign groups including Pakistani Taliban (Press TV 2013).

The role of Israel was cryptic, at least until 2013 when the Zionist state carried out several missile attacks on Syria (Gordon 2013), then began to give medical assistance and supplies to Islamist fighters on the Golan border (Israel Today 2013). It is clear that Israel backs the ousting of President Bashar al Assad. In 2012 head of Israel’s northern command, Major General Yair Golan, focused on Syria’s formidable Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, said ‘I would be very happy if [Assad] goes’ (Hayom 2012). The Zionist state has issued what might be considered ‘smokescreen’ statements, at times, saying it prefers secular
Bashar to Islamist rebels (Times of Israel 2013); but this does not accord with the broader fear of what they call an ‘axis of evil’ between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah (Hayom 2013). Senior Israeli defence officials have made the issue plain, saying that ‘al-Qaeda control over Syria would be preferable to a victory by Assad over the rebels’ (Pontz 2013; BICOM 2013). There are reports that Israel is selling arms to the Saudis, for use by their client groups in Syria (Alalam 2013b). That is, although both the al Qaeda type groups and secular Syria are seen by Israel as enemies, the squabbling, extremist sectarian groups are seen as a lesser risk than an organised and disciplined bloc across Lebanon, Syria and Iran. Israel is obsessed with breaking that nexus.

In November 2012, just a little more than six months after the US-led ‘Friends of Syria’ group had declared the exiled Syrian National Council (SNC) as the ‘legitimate representatives’ of the Syrian people, that group was demoted to a component of the ‘National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces’ (Barkan 2013: 1, 4). One of the foreign powers’ aims was said to be to reduce Muslim Brotherhood domination of the group. Despite this, the Brotherhood rapidly came to dominate both this new Coalition and the FSA’s ‘Supreme Military Command’ (SMC) (Draitser 2012). The SMC would gain influence by being made the principal channel of weapons. However two-thirds of the 30 members of this ‘Military Command’ were said to be associated with the Brotherhood, along with some other independent Salafi-Islamists (Barkan 2013: 5). Further, this FSA-SMC grouping did not include Jabhat al-Nusra, the Salafi group said to be the ‘official’ al Qaeda franchise in Syria. There is clearly considerable support amongst the FSA groups for al Nusra. When in 2012 the US declared al Nusra as ‘terrorist’, FSA fighters sprang to its defence, 29 groups declaring ‘we are all al Nusra’ (Cockburn 2012). There is thus a loose and sometimes fractious alliance between the Salafi fighters. By way of contrast, after entering the war in Qusayr, the Lebanese Shi‘ia party Hezbollah declared virtually all these Islamists to be takfiri groups, or sectarian killers (Daily Star 2013).

In 2013 General Salim Idriss was appointed head of the SMC. He was an FSA leader in whom Washington was prepared to place some trust (Greenfield 2013a). Idriss made some weak attempts to distance himself from al Nusra, but admitted that at least 50 percent of the rebels were Islamists and that he could work ‘alongside’ al Nusra (Greenfield 2013a). Despite suggestions of a battle between the ‘moderate’ FSA and extremists, a series of reports have noted, first, that Islamist fighters dominate and, second, that the Muslim Brotherhood ‘has emerged as the leading western sanctioned force’ in the region, dominating both the SNC and the SMC (Draitser 2012; Barkan 2013).

The split between Jabhat al Nusra and its expansionist wing from Iraq, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS, ISIL or DAESH), seemed to signal a divide between the FSA and ISIS. However this development might be better understood as a failure to merge, probably fed by local rivalry but also a Saudi desire to limit the independent power of any one group. The takeover of parts of northern Iraq by ISIS, and the switch of Washington towards ‘protective intervention’, drew attention to this ‘new’ group as some type of super jihadis. In fact ISIS had been doing its dirty business in Iraq since 2006. The extremist group displaced al Nusra and the remnants of the FSA in certain areas of Syria yet, despite the power struggles, the groups kept working closely together, against the Syrian Army. For example, in mid to late 2013, FSA groups led by Colonel Abdul Jabbar al-Okaidi and ISIS troops led by the Egyptian Abu Jandal and the US-trained Georgian Abu Omar al-Shishani fought together against the Syrian Arab Army for several months before seizing Menagh airbase, in Aleppo (Eretz Zen Youtube 2014; Hoff 2015). The rivalry between groups seemed local power struggles rather than any ideological split.
When in mid-2014 Washington created its ‘anti-ISIS coalition’ (Drennan 2014), with approval from the Government of Iraq, it managed to get its military ‘foot in the door’ of eastern Syria, without approval from the Syrian Government. However it soon became clear there was very limited will to attack ISIS in either Syria or Iraq. The air power of the US and its partners was used against ISIS in the northern Kurdish areas of both countries, but not at all when ISIS went towards to Syrian Army areas, such as Deir eZorr and Palmyra.

This was a ‘cattle prod’ operation, herding the fanatics away, at times, from areas where the US had collaborative agreements (in particular with elements of the Kurdish leadership) but giving them free rein to seize ground and establish bases in eastern Syria. A Syrian-American analyst observed that, while ISIS ‘could not attack any of the rebel or Kurdish forces without interference from the Anti-ISIS Coalition’, they could travel freely to Syrian Army controlled areas ‘without a single Anti-ISIS Coalition aircraft attacking their convoys or notifying the Syrian Air Force of the looming ISIS threat’ (Fadel 2015b). In addition, there seemed to be coordination between the simultaneous offensives by ISIS in the east (on Palmyra, East Homs and Deir eZorr) and the Jabhat al Nusra-led ‘Army of Conquest’ in the West (Fadel 2015b). The latter group, pouring in from Turkey, seized most of Idlib in successive waves through mid-2015. Those twin fronts, with US weapons, also succeeded in dividing the attention of the Syrian Army.

As outlined in Chapter 11, most of the FSA groups defected to al Nusra or ISIS, presumably following better money offers. Back in late 2013 an anti-Syrian British journalist observed that the ‘Free Syrian Army’ had become a ‘largely criminal enterprise’. The leaders were so well paid some really did not want the war to end (Sherlock 2013). That raises the question of the extent to which these ‘jihadis’ have been simply mercenaries, rather than religious fanatics. I asked a senior Syrian official about the mercenary motivation, at Syria’s Ministry of Reconciliation (Musalah) in late 2013. He told me that some of the jihadist leaders had been religious and others not. However, while the mercenary motivation was strong, he said ‘we cannot discount the impact of literally hundreds of [TV and radio] channels from the Gulf, broadcasting those [jihadist extremist] ideas’. It seems that religious ideology, however crude, also remains important, to help motivate many of the empire’s foot soldiers.

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Co-opted mass media and human rights ‘watchdogs’ have been essential to the propaganda war against Syria. Indeed, it is not possible, in the 21st century, to run a sustained proxy war dependent on public support without the backing of a veritable army of such collaborators. For this reason Pentagon doctrine in recent years carries highly ambitious aims, such as ‘Full Spectrum Dominance’, meaning informational, economic and cultural dominance, as well as military dominance (JCS 2000; Engdahl 2011). Competitor broadcast stations have come to be regarded as legitimate military targets (Norton-Taylor 1999) and embedded communications media have become key allies.

During the 2003 invasion of Iraq the concept of ‘embedded journalists’ became well known, as western journalists were integrated with US invasion troops. They were not just physically embedded, they were given background briefings, security protection and controls, rules of behaviour and direct, day-to-day contact with the imperial forces. That experience helped them humanise the problems and suffering of the invaders (Wells 2003). The other side could become a body count or a caricature, an enemy at arm’s length. Only much later would some of the invaders’ atrocities (massacres, rape, torture) see the light of day. Private television stations began to actualise and humanise war as never before, but in a very one-sided way. In later studies, while the journalists involved agreed they showed a ‘narrow slice of the conflict’, they maintained a ‘positive view’ of their work (Fahmy and Johnston 2005).

Yet studies of the differences in reporting between embedded and non-embedded US journalist shows, unsurprisingly, ‘significant differences in overall tone toward the military, trust in military personnel, framing, and authoritativeness between embedded and non-embedded articles’ (Haigh et al 2006). That embeddedness became an institution, for the wars of the 21st century.

What of diversity? The internet age opened new and potentially diverse and independent channels of information; but the big powers were alive to this. Media monopolies gained power through their ‘dynamic interlocks’ with the other investor groups to become ‘a coalition of power on a global scale’ (Bagdikian 2004: 136). That power extended into the digital era through ‘aggressive digital marketing, interactive advertising, and personal data collection’ (Chester 2007), creating ‘supermedia monopolies’ through domination of space, search engines and content interactivity (Chester 2007: 145, 167-170, 182-183).
At the same time there has been a proliferation of online NGOs, particular in the humanitarian and human rights areas, with keen interest in missions which rely on human rights pretexts. Some of these NGOs are genuinely independent but many have been funded, linked, co-opted and embedded in big power agendas. The creation of heavily politicised ‘civil society’ voices was already the focus of the US Government funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED), set up during the 1980s to fund ostensibly non-political groups in target countries, but identified as a ‘Trojan horse’ for US political subversion (Blum 2000). The first President of the NED, Allen Weinstein, said in 1991 that ‘a lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA’ (Lefebvre 2013). Indeed, the NED has been implicated in several coups in Latin America and the Caribbean, and is now banned in a number of target countries, such as Iran, Cuba and Venezuela.

Embedded media are a particularly important force in covert wars. The most recent ‘Islamist insurrection’ in Syria could not have attracted much outside support if its true character were well known, so the suppression of its character along with the traditional demonisation of the enemy and related moral panics has been a central task of Syria’s enemies. Yet because of the missionary claims of the project – in support of democracy and revolution, the protection of children and so on – in many cases it has been the liberal side of western politics that has ‘flown the flag’ for deeper war. That has included the liberal media and a number of non-governmental ‘watchdog’ groups, many deeply embedded with the ‘regime change’ missions of the big powers.

Apparently ‘liberal’ media channels such as Al Jazeera and the UK Guardian, which had criticised Washington’s invasion of Iraq in 2003, became the most ferocious in urging attacks on Syria. Anonymous sources linked to a network of mainly US-based groups such as Human Rights Watch, ‘Avaaz’ and ‘Purpose’, and their online creations such as the ‘White Helmets’ and ‘The Syria Campaign’, joined together to push for a ‘no fly zone’ in Syria (Sterling 2015a). It was very clear, after the NATO bombing of Libya in 2011, that this meant a direct military assault on Syria and mass slaughter, with the aim of toppling the government. Such has become the moral corruption of western ‘human rights’ advocacy.

**The Liberal War Trolls**

Some of the more established ‘liberal’ NGOs have played a key role in the disinformation campaign against Syria. Yalla la Barra (2015) points out that Kenneth Roth, director of the US-based Human Rights Watch, has shown an obsession with President Bashar al Assad. Following the conventional propaganda practice of endless repetition, Roth has tweeted literally hundreds of times about Assad, constantly trying to link him to atrocities against civilians, dishonestly using photos of Gaza and Kobane (after Israeli and US/ISIS bombing) to press his point (Syrian Free Press 2015). Roth even equated the Syrian President with the US nuclear attack on Japan in 1945: ‘For the planners of the Hiroshima bomb (like Assad today) the point was to kill civilians’ (Roth 2015b).

This was plainly false. Unlike Washington’s crime at Hiroshima, which housed no military facility, there has never been credible evidence that Assad aimed to kill civilians. Even more telling, nowhere does Roth raise the fact that ‘in Syria the United States and its allies are funding and training extremist jihadi factions with the goal of overthrowing the government of a sovereign member-state of the United Nations’ (La Barra 2015). This is an obvious breach of the United Nations Charter, as also Article One of both covenants of the International Bill of Rights. Apparently this is of no concern to Human Rights Watch. Indeed, Roth became one of the most aggressive advocates within the US foreign policy elite for the US bombing of Syria. In late 2013 he questioned whether the Obama
Administration’s idea of a ‘symbolic’ bombing of Syria would be enough. Director of the MIT Centre for International Studies John Tirman called this ‘possibly the most ignorant and irresponsible statement ever by a major human-rights advocate’ (Bhatt 2014).

Amnesty International also joined Washington’s regime change mission. Another non-governmental body, set up in 1961 in London, Amnesty became famous for writing letters in support of prisoners of conscience. In recent times it has been co-opted by big power politics. Drawing on partisan sources linked to the Islamist armed groups, Amnesty has trumpeted an almost completely one-sided war narrative. For example, it has repeated the armed groups’ claims that Syrian Army bombing of terrorist controlled areas has led to a catastrophic ‘collateral damage’ rate of almost 100 civilian casualties for every one ‘fighter’ killed (AI 2015). If this were true, it would be a tremendous indictment of the Syrian Army.

But it is not true. The ‘evidence’ is tainted by partisan sources and contradicted by other information. Amnesty accesses its ‘witnesses’ through groups strongly linked to the Islamist armed groups (including the Violations Documentation Centre (VDC), the Syrian Network for Human Rights), and financed by Turkey, the USA, the Saudis and Qatar, all of whom seek the overthrow of the Syrian Government (Sterling 2015b). From the beginning of the conflict the Islamist groups have fabricated stories about government massacres, and have portrayed their own casualties as ‘civilians’ (e.g. Rosen 2012). Amnesty also draws on a group called ‘Civil Defence’ or the ‘White Helmets’, set up in the USA and providing assistance to the internationally banned terrorist group, Jabhat al Nusra (Beeley 2015b).

Not only was Amnesty’s evidence tainted by partisan sources, they have not looked closely at their own sources. The VDC published data for victims in Idlib put ‘Regime Idlib Fatalities’ for March-April 2015 at 12, and ‘Martyr Idlib Fatalities’ (opposition fighters and supporting civilians) at 662. This latter group includes ISIS and other Islamist fighters (Sterling 2015b). In this ‘dataset’ for Idlib the VDC merges fighters with civilians, as has been common practice from the Islamists since the beginning of the conflict.

These two NGOs did not become embedded during the Syrian crisis. Although neither is funded directly by the US government they have developed very strong links. Human Rights Watch (HRW) used to get its funds from a variety of mainly US foundations. HRW Middle East reports often rely on and acknowledge grants from pro-Israel foundations. Created as a ‘private’ US group in the 1978, with a cold war focus on rights in the Soviet Union, the HRW board is now tightly cross-linked to the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), a virtual ‘Who’s Who’ of the US foreign policy elite. HRW also has its ‘foot’ well inside the US State Department door and has become a key driver of the idea of US military intervention on human rights grounds.

The CFR in the year 2000 presented a ‘three options’ report on ‘humanitarian intervention’ for President Bill Clinton. The strongest claim for intervention, to prevent great crimes, came from the State Department, but that paper was written by Holly Burkhalter, a former Director of Human Rights Watch. Burkhalter argued a need for US ‘moral leadership’, to intervene everywhere to suppress ‘genocide and crimes against humanity’. That idea appeals to the notion of US exceptionalism, that the USA is somehow the moral leader of the world. Contributions from Defence and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were more cautious, stressing the need to more closely link any intervention with US interests (CFR 2000). The latter position happens to be consistent with traditional military doctrine of avoiding open-ended wars.
In Latin America, HRW ‘soft-pedalled’ on US-compliant regimes such as Colombia, by far the worst human rights abuser in that continent. By contrast, it repeatedly attacked the government of the late Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. HRW has always had a political agenda. According to José Miguel Vivanco, director of the group’s Americas division, its December 2008 report on Venezuela (‘A Decade under Chavez’), was written ‘because we wanted to demonstrate to the world that Venezuela is not a model for anyone’. That report was roundly criticized by more than a hundred academics for not meeting ‘even the most minimal standards of scholarship, impartiality, accuracy of credibility’ (Acuña et al 2008). After a number of HRW directors and advisors were observed moving to or from the US State Department, a group of Nobel Prize winners accused Human Rights Watch of running a ‘revolving door’ between its offices and those of the US government (Alternet 2014). The group seems unconcerned.

Like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty does not oppose western intervention on principles of human rights and international law. Instead it advises the big powers how to carry out interventions. If they are ‘considering supplying arms to non-state or armed groups in Syria, first carry out a rigorous human rights risk assessment and establish a robust monitoring process’, they say. That is music to an imperial power’s ears. Yet international law does not allow for arms supply to any non-state group, let alone to attack a recognised state (Sterling 2015b). Amnesty has made itself an advisor to Washington on how to add a human rights gloss to its illegal interventions.

To its discredit, Amnesty in recent years has built a history of backing fabricated pretexts for war and military occupation. In the lead up to the First Gulf War (1990-1991) Amnesty promoted the story of a teenage girl who claimed Iraqi troops were stealing incubators and leaving babies to die on the floor of a Kuwaiti hospital. It turned out the story was fake and that girl was the daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador (Stauber and Rampton 2002; Regan 2002). Prior to the 2011 NATO bombing of Libya, Amnesty helped promote stories that President Gaddafi was using ‘black mercenaries’ to slaughter Libyan civilians. After the country was in ruins and Gaddafi had been murdered, Amnesty (France) President Genevieve Garrigos admitted there was no evidence to back those stories (Truth Syria 2012). In 2012 Amnesty attracted widespread criticism by a billboard campaign which urged ‘NATO: keep the progress going’ in Afghanistan. The reference to ‘progress’ was to supposed advances for the rights of women, under the NATO occupation. In fact, a decade after the 2001 invasion, Afghan women still had terribly low levels of education and health. No foreign military occupation advances health and education, let alone democracy.

This ‘NATO: keep the progress going’ campaign was driven by Suzanne Nossel, Executive Director of Amnesty (USA) who had moved smoothly across from the US State Department, where she had been working on US policy against Russia, Iran, Libya and Syria (Teil 2012: 146). Wright and Rowley (2012) said Amnesty was ‘shilling for US wars’. The group was destroying its own reputation by adopting the Human Rights Watch ‘revolving door’ approach to the US State Department.

The ‘liberal’ media became embedded in war plans, in its own way. While stories from the BBC, the UK Guardian and the New York Times deserve scrutiny for their consistently anti-Syria approach, it should not be hard to understand the disgrace of Al Jazeera. That channel’s principal owner, the Qatari monarchy, had financed and armed al Qaeda styled groups in Libya and Syria, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood linked groups (Kirkpatrick 2014). A British-Iraqi analyst observes that:

‘Qatari rulers ... saw in Al Jazeera a vehicle for spreading their political influence ... [as] Qatar became the headquarters of US military operations throughout the Middle East’.

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Al Jazeera remains one of the root sources of constant scares about a supposed sectarian threat from Iranian and ‘Shia’ influence in the region (Ramadani 2012).

The little independence the station had once shown, when the US invaded Iraq in 2003, was soon behind it.

With the conflicts in Syria and Egypt Al Jazeera journalists began resigning in droves, citing management interference. Beirut bureau head Ghassan Ben Jeddo resigned soon after the Syrian conflict began, saying the station only allowed ‘guests from America who only criticise the regime in Syria and support the regime in Bahrain and persons who justify NATO intervention. This is unacceptable.’ Later, Managing Director Hassan Shaaban resigned, saying Al Jazeera refused to show pictures he had of ‘armed fighters clashing with the Syrian Army in Wadi Khaled’. The station accused him of being ‘shabiha’, a regime thug. Journalist Afshin Rattansi also said the station had become one-sided, while Ted Rall said his columns were being rejected on a regular basis (RT 2012). Beirut correspondent Ali Hashem also resigned. In 2013 Al Jazeera in Egypt lost 22 staff because of intolerable management-directed bias. Staff had been ordered to favour the ousted (elected) Muslim Brotherhood regime. As a consequence, Egypt’s incoming military government declared Al Jazeera an ‘enemy of Egypt’ (Taylor 2013).

In 2015, as the western powers and their Gulf monarchy allies were struggling to maintain the fictional split between terrorist groups and ‘moderate rebels’, Al Jazeera English staff were instructed to not refer to Jabhat al Nusra [the official al Qaeda franchise in Syria, a banned terrorist organisation in most of the world] as ‘al Qaeda’. An internal memo from Executive Producer Kelly Jarrett instructed her staff:

‘Please don’t introduce al Nusra Front as ‘al Qaeda affiliated’. Syria’s war is complex ... The reality is that al Qaeda isn’t the organisation it used to be and it’s irrelevant in this context. Al Nusra Front is part of Syria’s rebel coalition which is made up of multiple armed groups ... our viewers need to understand that these armed groups form the main opposition to the government led by President Assad’ (MEE 2015a).

There was said to be no revolt over this because ‘anybody who cares about the channel’s editorial line has long since left the station’ (5 Pillars 2015). Charlie Winter, an analyst at the Quilliam Foundation, said this shift was ‘all part of a normalisation process that al-Qaeda in Syria has been seeking to do for some time now ... It wants to appear more palatable to the West’ (MEE 2015a).

Techniques of Persuasion

While almost all the western media, state owned or corporate, rally to a new war, the liberal media in particular seems to warm to a ‘saviour’ role in a missionary or ‘humanitarian’ war. Many of their propaganda techniques are quite traditional. First they become fiercely partisan, humanising the ‘freedom fighters’ on our side, demonising the other side, strongly excluding dissenting voices or the scrutiny of official war claims. Second, they latch onto popular but false histories, repeating them ad nauseum. The BBC in late 2015, well over four years into the war, repeated several of those key lies in a potted history of the conflict. First they said the conflict began because the Syrian Army killed unarmed protestors and ‘opposition supporters eventually began to take up arms, first to defend themselves and later to expel security forces from local areas’ (BBC 2015b).

In fact the Saudis had admitted, years earlier, that they had armed the Islamist insurrection in Daraa, at the very start of the crisis in March 2011. The BBC ‘history’ also claims that ‘Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar back the more moderate Sunni-dominated opposition’
Yet the previous year US Vice-President Joe Biden and head of the US armed forces General Martin Dempsey had publicly admitted that their regional allies Turkey, the Saudis and Qatar were financing all the extremist groups, including ISIS. Equating the al Qaeda groups with ‘moderate Sunnis’ was not simple bias on the part of the BBC, it was deliberate misinformation. A third general technique was direct engagement in, or promotion of, fabrications. Let’s look at some prominent examples.

In the early months of the crisis, in 2011, as the Syrian Army engaged with the Islamist Farouq Brigade (FSA) in Homs city, the stories of a young British-Syrian man named Danny Abdul Dayem were given great exposure on CNN, Sky News and Al Arabiya. Danny claimed civilians were being indiscriminately slaughtered by bombing in Homs. He was there, he said, and told CNN that hundreds were being killed in the streets. Video evidence proved Danny to be a charlatan manufacturing his stories, complete with studio generated sound effects, in league with the armed groups (Syrians Worldwide 2012; Emassian, Kelanee, Kardous and al Kadri 2012).

A number of western journalists, having been told the Islamist groups were friendly ‘freedom fighters’, entered Syria illegally in search of a story, only to find themselves kidnapped by the Islamists and bombed by the Syrian Army. One such group of five, led by NBC journalist Richard Engel, was kidnapped in December 2012. The subsequent story NBC ran was that Engel and his colleagues had been taken by a pro-Assad, pro-Hezbollah Shiite militia. Engel gave detail of how the ‘pro-Assad’ captors had ‘brutally tortured’ the journalists and killed their Free Syrian Army driver, before they were rescued by anti-government rebels. Some years later a New York Times group spoke to a number of people and concluded that ‘Engel’s team was almost certainly taken by a Sunni criminal element affiliated with the Free Syrian Army’ (Somaiya, Chivers and Shoumali 2015). It turns out that NBC executives knew all of this back at the time of Engels’ captivity (Gharib 2015).

The New York Times story prompted Engel to ‘re-report’ that he had concluded that those in the kidnap group were ‘Sunni rebels’, claiming they had ‘put on an elaborate ruse’ to pretend they were ‘Shiite Shabiha militiamen’ (Somaiya, Chivers and Shoumali 2015). NBC labelled this turnaround as simply ‘new detail’ and ‘more on the story’ (Engel 2015). However in war propaganda terms the story had done a complete ‘about face’, and only after the fraud had been exposed.

The BBC has gone beyond repeating fake histories. British media critic Robert Stuart has pursued the BBC over a 30 September 2013 documentary ‘Saving Syria’s Children’, and linked news reports, which claimed the Syrian Government launched an incendiary bomb attack on a school, using ‘napalm’ or chemical weapons. The context was a period of intense international pressure, with the US seeking to falsely implicate the Syrian Government in chemical weapons attacks (see Chapter 8). This ‘school attack’ was said to be on 26 August 2013 in Urm Al-Kubra, Aleppo.

The BBC made use of prominent anti-Syrian Doctor Rola Hallam, whose identity was not revealed in the report. But this was not simply a case of a story being compromised by partisan sources. The video was ‘filmed by BBC staff and others at a nearby hospital’. Stuart presents evidence to show this footage is ‘largely, if not entirely, staged’. That is, the BBC team played an active role in fabricating the evidence. Experts contacted by Stuart have examined the footage and say, effectively, that the portrayed ‘burns victims’ are not ‘burns victims’. The audio of comments by Dr Hallam (who wore a surgical mask) was edited and changed between different versions of the video. Stuart (2013, 2015) has posted a catalogue of evidence online about this fabrication. He has wrung some reluctant admissions
from the BBC’s internal complaints process, but no substantial retraction (Stuart 2015).

Of course in many cases, the BBC and others simply repeat, and so hide behind, the lies of their partisan sources. Using the same Islamist sources, in particular the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), the BBC regularly repeats the claims that attacks on Islamist fighters are attacks on civilians. ‘Dozens’ of civilians killed in the East Ghouta, ‘activists say’ (BBC 2015a). Yet there is no reference in this BBC story to the last, large and filmed evacuations of thousands of civilians from that same area, several months earlier (SANA 2015). Eric Zuesse (2015) says a string of lies by the BBC have improbably blamed President Assad for the rise of al Qaeda and ISIS, as also for all those who have died in the dirty war on Syria.

The Australian media followed much the same pattern as the BBC, with more stories of ‘barrel bomb’ attacks in East Ghouta, an area held by Jabhat al Nusra and the Islamic Front for more than two years, and the base for regular mortar attacks on Damascus. The Army bombing is presented as though it were either indiscriminate or deliberate attacks on civilians, making use of confected video provided by the armed groups. For example, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) ran a story in August 2015 claiming 80 or 100 civilians had been killed by air strikes on Douma. The ABC author is said to be ‘Middle East correspondent Sophie McNeil and wires’, but the sources are flag-flying Islamist supporters, in particular the SOHR. The point of the misinformation is plain as McNeil editorialises with a call for deeper western military intervention: ‘as long as the west fails to act against the Assad government, Islamic State will continue to flourish’ (McNeil 2015).

As with the state owned ABC, much of the Australian corporate media simply repeated White House claims that ‘Assad has gassed children’, regardless of the evidence and at times making up their own ‘evidence’. For example, Rick Morton of Rupert Murdoch’s The Australian claimed in January 2014 that ‘a UN report provided overwhelming evidence that only the Syrian regime was capable of committing documented chemical weapons attacks’ (Morton 2014). In fact, the most recent UN report at that time said no such thing. Whether from laziness or deliberation, Morton confuses White House statements with UN reports. The UN’s December 2013 report allocated no blame for five confirmed chemical attacks in Syria, but said that two were ‘against soldiers’ and one was against ‘soldiers and civilians’. This strongly suggests the attacks were carried out by the enemies of Syrian soldiers (UN 2013: 18-21).

Several earlier media reports showed Jabhat al Nusra had possession of and had used sarin gas (see Chapter 9). Many journalists kept repeating the White House chemical weapons claims, long after US experts reported that the rockets under scrutiny ‘could not possibly have been fired at East Ghouta from the … Syrian Government controlled area’, as suggested by the White House (Lloyd and Postol 2014). Two years later two Turkish opposition MPs demanded an investigation into allegations that the Turkish Government had procured the sarin gas for Islamist groups to use in that incident (Today’s Zaman 2015).

In a particularly ugly story the BBC assisted in an attempted cover up of the March 2013 murder of Syria’s most senior Quranic scholar, Sheikh Ramadan al Bouti. The Sheikh, a strong Syrian pluralist on religious matters, had spoken out against violent sectarianism. For that had been branded, by the Islamists and their backers in the western media, as a ‘Pro-Assad Cleric’ (Mourtada and Gladstone 2013). Jabhat al Nusra threatened to kill him, they did kill him and then, as had been their habit, they tried to blame the Syrian Government. Their bomb was set off in a Damascus mosque, where the Sheikh was speaking, killing him and more than 40 others (Mourtada and Gladstone 2013). However a social
media smokescreen created by the Islamists was copied and magnified by BBC journalist Jim Muir. He claimed ‘it was inconceivable that such a small blast could have caused the death of around 50 people, as reported by state media’, pointing to video which showed al Bouti did not die immediately.

The suggestion was that the attack was faked and the Government somehow used a fake incident to kill the Sheikh themselves (Muir 2013). This was a disgraceful lie. Later that year five of the terrorists were arrested and confessed on Syrian television to the murder in great detail, one saying that 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’ (Syrian Alikhbaria 2013). The special fatwa (religious order) was apparently needed for them to kill Muslims in a Mosque. After these confessions, neither Jim Muir nor the BBC retracted their story. It is worth noting that, by this time the British state was providing substantial material support to armed Syrian groups, including those ‘moderate rebels’ working closely with Jabhat al Nusra (Hopkins 2014). The BBC made itself complicit with the criminals.

A string of western stories have sought to humanise western backed terrorists, while dehumanising those of the Syrian Army as simply ‘Assad loyalists’, rather than people defending their country. In November 2013 Australian media headlined the ‘Brisbane family man’s suicide blast in Syria’ (Kryriacou and McKenna 2013). There was no mention of the names of any of the 35 Syrians said to have been killed by this foreign terrorist. In March 2014 British media gave similar treatment to Pakistani-British suicide truck bomber Abdul Waheed Majeed, who drove a huge armoured truck packed with explosives towards a Syrian Army position in Aleppo. The ‘41-year-old father of three’ is pictured giving sweets to little children and the BBC report highlights the quote from his brother Hafeez, ‘my brother was not a terrorist – my brother was a hero’ (Casciani 2014).

The BBC made no mention of the real hero, the young Syrian soldier Mohammed Rajab, who lost his life while stopping that truck bomb with his hand-held RPG launcher (Syrian Lioness 2014). Similarly, in September 2015 the British Independent ran a graphic story of the ‘Young Uzbek suicide bomber filmed crying before carrying out final mission in Syria’, he appeared ‘physically distressed [and] is seen being hugged and comforted by militants as he weeps before embarking on his final mission’. His friend tells him, ‘Jafar, my brother, don’t be afraid. When you are scared, remember Allah’. He replies: “I’m just scared I won’t succeed,” before he is sent off to his death’ (Eleftheriou-Smith 2015). There is no mention of any of the Syrian people killed by this foreign terrorist. Syrians had become ‘non-people’ for a racist western media.

Embedded researchers have added stories which seek to make ‘moderates’ of sectarian killers. In January 2015 Foreign Affairs (Journal of the US Council on Foreign Relations) published an article based on a survey of ‘50 Islamist fighters from Ahrar al Sham and al Nusra, along with several sheikhs who were educated in Saudi Arabia’. The report attempts to show that these people support democratic values. Headlined ‘Syria’s Democracy Jihad’, the sub-heading was ‘Why ISIS fighters support the vote’. In a classic case of telling them what they want to hear, these sectarian, notorious for beheading unbelievers and publicising their massacres, ’agreed’ that ‘democracy is preferable to any other form of government’. The authors observed that this ‘seems to contradict the goal of building … [an] Islamic caliphate’, but press on to suggest these gangs may represent some sort of democratic future for Syria (Mironova, Mri, Nielsen and Whitt 2015). What an insult to human intelligence.
However that story was consistent with the broader move to rebrand and humanise al Qaeda. After the US armed Hazm Brigade defected and handed over its weapons (including anti-tank weapons) to Jabhat al Nusra (Sherlock 2014), the notion of a distinct ‘moderate’ rebel force, once more, became difficult to publicly sustain. So in early 2015 there was a new drive to rehabilitate Jabhat al Nusra, the strongest anti-government militia in Syria after ISIS. Even though the group had long been considered the ‘official’ al Qaeda franchise in Syria, all such labels can be reshaped. Maram Susli (2015) points out that the New York Times argued that Jabhat al Nusra might ‘cut ties with al Qaeda in the hope of receiving more military aid’, while Reuters observed such a move might help it get ‘more support from Gulf Arab states hostile to both Assad and Islamic State’. The BBC took this one step further, with an opinion piece by Dr David Roberts, who said Qatar arming al Nusra ‘may be a good thing’, with no mention of cutting ties to al Qaeda. Roberts observes that ‘in the face of IS and Bashar al-Assad’s resilience, a reformed, effective fighting force would be welcomed by the West … Qatar’s plan is as viable as any other’ (Roberts 2015). How could any state carry out its dirty war without such an army of compliant media assistants?

On the other side, some small western groups have been tracking media lies over the war on Syria. The US group FAIR (Fairness in Accuracy and Reporting), established in 1986, has pointed to the blacking out of CIA history in Syria, by the New York Times. When discussing the Obama administration’s supposed ‘hands-off’ approach to the Syrian conflict, and while mentioning a failed Pentagon ‘rebel’ training program, ‘they didn’t just omit the fact that the CIA has been arming, training and funding rebels since 2012, they heavily implied they had never done so’ (Johnson 2015). Many reports had previously shown the CIA program of ‘arming, funding and training anti-Assad forces’, producing perhaps 10,000 ‘rebel fighters’ and spending about one billion per year (Johnson 2015).

Two British groups, established more recently, have a stronger focus on Syria. Media Lens was established by David Edwards and David Cromwell in 2001 and examines the wars in the Middle East the big powers have driven since that same year. It has a series of reflective, analytical articles on war, such as the valuable piece by David Edwards “Limited but Persuasive’ Evidence – Syria, Sarin, Libya, Lies’, which touches on the poor state of British public opinion about the casualties of the Iraq invasion (of course, conditioned by the poor state of the British media), manipulations over the chemical weapons stories in Syria, and the lies told about Libya and, in particular, over the supposedly impending ‘genocide in Benghazi’ (Edwards 2013).

‘Off Guardian’ is an initiative focused on misinformation from the British Guardian newspaper, particular over the wars on Libya and Syria, but also over the crisis in Ukraine. The UK Guardian’s Syrian stories under scrutiny have included: fake stories on ‘barrel bombs’, hiding the nature of Syrian ‘opposition’ groups, biased reporting of the Russian initiative against terrorism in Syria and Iraq, pro-Israeli spin on Palestine reporting, and the constant drive for ‘humanitarian intervention’ in Syria (Off Guardian 2015). The latter story cites Simon Jenkins ‘wringing his hands and his conscience’ over previous disastrous western interventions (Guardian Watch 2015), but then preferring an invasion to bombing:

‘If ever in the past quarter century there was a clear humanitarian case for intervening to pacify, reorder and restore good governance to a failed state, it must be in Syria ... there is no other moral course but to insert ground troops’ (Jenkins 2015).

The critical site pours scorn on these old imperial illusions, sensibly concluding ‘the rationale behind western intervention has been discredited and exposed to the point where nothing honest can be said in its favour’ (Guardian Watch 2015). But those few small
groups, and a handful of independent analysts, have hardly been a match for the western media machine, which uses misinformation systematically to bang the drums of war.

**‘Humanitarian War’ NGOs**

Apart from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, a new cluster of Syria-specific and mostly online NGOs were created in the USA. The White Helmets, the Syria Campaign, Free Syrian Voices and Mosaic Syria, are creations ‘Avaaz’ (funded by the Open Society Institute) and a linked group ‘Purpose’. Avaaz was set up in 2007 by ‘Res Publica’, and was initially backed by more than a million dollars by the OSI. In recent years it has had a budget of several million per year from undisclosed private donors (NGO Monitor 2013). Shadowy in its structure, Avaaz shares with Res Publica strong links to Zionist organisations (ESB 2012).

Presenting itself as ‘activist’ and a ‘human rights’ group Avaaz focuses on internet campaigns on international issues, prominently Palestine-Israel. It is critical of Israeli practice, and many orthodox Zionists see Avaaz as anti-Israel (e.g. Rosenthal 2013). However I suggest the Avaaz approach is better understood as ‘Left-Zionist’, a liberal pro-Israel current which seeks to present itself as leading the movement for Palestinian rights while preserving most of the racial privilege embedded in the Zionist state. In 2011 Avaaz published a video which heavily criticised Israel’s ongoing colonial practice (the ‘settlements’), while condemning violent Palestinian resistance and promoting a peaceful ‘two state solution’ (Avaaz 2011). Israelis sometimes call Jews condemning Israel as ‘shooting and crying’ (Landsmann 2013), but this line is consistent with the rhetoric, if not the practice, of Washington. While presenting liberal Jews as leading the Palestinian cause, Left-Zionists have been as savage as any other Zionists against Israel’s enemies: the Palestinian armed resistance and its principal supporters Iran, Syria and Hezbollah.

As the sectarian Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood and Wahhabism are essentially divisive, Zionists of all varieties will back them against nationalist Arab or Muslim groups and governments. For that reason we see a strong symbiosis between the new groups and the sectarian Islamists. Avaaz has consistently backed western military intervention (‘no fly zones’) in Libya and Syria (Wadi 2015), a central demand of the al Qaeda groups.

Some of the Avaaz people (Jeremy Hymans, David Madden and James Slezak) set up a type of mother company, ‘Purpose’, which created many of the Syria specific groups (Morningstar 2015). They are slick Wall Street creations, aimed at influencing online opinion, with fake Syrian roots, justified by their links to small groups of Islamist ‘activists’, such as photographer Khaled Khatib, embedded with the armed groups. In this way Left-Zionists collaborate with Islamists in their campaigns against secular Syria.

These ‘humanitarian war’ NGOs have engaged in a range of activities, but mostly demonising President Assad and the Syrian Army, condemning anything done by the Army and promoting a ‘no fly zone’ which, after Libya, is a clear euphemism for bombing and regime change. In June 2014 The Syria Campaign, alarmed that Bashar al Assad’s election campaign (Sawa) had received 200,000 ‘likes’ on Facebook, tried to block Facebook hosting the page (Rushe and Jalabi 2014); it seems they succeeded, if only at the last moment (Ruble 2014).

In their campaigns for a ‘no fly zone’, Avaaz, The Syria Campaign and The White Helmets have had as little regard for the truth as Human Rights Watch. Without no credible evidence at all Avaaz claimed ‘Women in Syria are being forced to stand in front of tanks and act as human shields before they’re stripped and raped by soldiers’ (Avaaz 2013). This was while
the Syrian Army’s opponents, the sectarian Islamists, were openly boasting about their kid-napping and raping of Syrian women and girls, crimes backed by fatwas from their pseudo-religious leaders (Chumley 2013).

The White Helmets (aka Syrian Civil Defence) group has been directed by James le Mesurier, formerly a British soldier and mercenary with the Olive Group (now merged with Blackwater-Academi into Constellis Holdings). The group hides its sources of finance but most is said to come from USAID and the British Government (Beeley 2015c). Several of its associates in Syria, Mosab Obeidat, Khaled Diab, and Farouq al Habib have strong links to the armed groups and their funders. Obeidat worked for Qatar’s Red Crescent for some years, then ‘with the US Department of State in Jordan’ (MayDay Rescue 2015). Diab also worked for the Qatar’s Red Crescent, where he was accused of providing about $2.2 million to terrorist groups in Syria (Cartalucci 2013). Habib was a member of the ‘Homs Revolutionary Council’ (Beeley 2015c). In one incident the group showed video of a fire in Daraya and a canister very similar to those rocketed into Damascus by the Islamic Front, claiming the Syrian Government had launched a ‘napalm attack on a school’. The British Guardian obligingly ran the story (Shaheen 2015).

In August 2015 Avaaz and the Syria Campaign ran photos of dead children’s bodies in building rubble, claiming they were victims of Syrian Government attacks on Islamic Front-held East Ghouta in 2015. That same photo had been used a year earlier to illustrate a story of ISIS having massacred 700 tribespeople in Deir Ezorr (Chronicle 2014). Tracked back further, the photo was claimed by Getty News in March 2014 and attributed to photographer Khaled Khatib as the child victims of earlier ‘barrel bombing’ in Aleppo (Getty Images 2014). Khatib is described as an ‘activist’ who operates in areas occupied by Free Syrian Army armed groups, and an ‘Aleppo member of ‘Syrian Civil Defence’, aka the White Helmets (al Khatib 2015; Laughland 2015). In a twitter post (August 2015) the White Helmets (2015a) used a photo of a bombed building to pretend they had ‘arrived at the scene of the blast’ where ‘about one dozen barrel bombs have torn a whole tower block apart’. That photo had been posted 28 months earlier, in the Christian Science Monitor (CSM 2013). It is plain there has been substantial recycling of war photos, and that those embedded with the Islamist groups have few scruples over this sort of partisan disinformation.

Embedded groups work more effectively together. On 30 October 2015 Doctors Without Borders (which funds clinics in areas controlled by the armed groups) and The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that ‘at least 70 people were killed and 550 wounded in attacks on a marketplace’ in North East Damascus. ‘The devastation caused by the initial air strike on the market was exacerbated by further shelling on the rescue teams’ (MEE 2015b). A closer look at the story and its associated video shows the following. First, Douma has been held by armed sectarian groups (al Nusra and the Islamic Front) for more than three years, and the last large groups of civilians were evacuated in January 2015 (Reuters 2015).

They have shelled Damascus constantly with mortars and ‘hellfire canons’, which use large gas canisters as shells (e.g. McDonnell and Bulos 2015). Close examination of this video shows that the dead, the wounded and the rescuers are all men of fighting age, repeatedly shouting ‘Allahuakhbar’, in the Islamist fashion. Many of the rescuers are wearing ‘White Helmets’ vests. The White Helmets’ Arabic title of the video refers to ‘Burning martyrs’, a reference to dead ‘jihadis’ who have given their lives for their cause (White Helmets 2015b). The story illustrates well the working links between the armed groups, the White Helmets, the SOHR and the media, in this case the UK-based Middle East Eye.
Immediately after Russian air support for the Syrian Army began, on 30 September 2015, the White Helmets published a photo on its Twitter account, depicting a bleeding girl and claiming she was injured during a Russian airstrike. This false claim ‘was immediately exposed … the photo of the wounded girl was actually published on September 25, 2015, five days before the Russian air strikes’ (Sputnik 2015). The main White Helmet theme has been the same as that of HRW: ‘Barrel Bombs, Not ISIS, Are the Greatest Threat to Syrians’ (Roth 2015a).

This plays on ignorance of what a ‘barrel bomb’ really is (a bomb dropped from a helicopter) and deflects attention from the mounting evidence that the US and its allies are the main force behind all the extremist groups. Western news agencies, once again relying on their man in England, the ‘Syrian Observatory for Human Rights’ (SOHR), gave exact numbers of the civilians, women and children supposedly being killed by Russia air strikes (AFP 2015). The Wall Street Journal also cited the SOHR and, drawing on the US-based Syrian American Medical Society, claimed that ‘Russian airstrike struck nine hospitals in Syria this month … killing and injuring tens of staff and civilians’ (Abdulrahim 2015). However Dominik Stillhart, director of operations at the International Red Cross, said none of his staff on the ground in Syria were aware of any such incidents (RT 2015). When Russian Television challenged US government spokespeople to provide detail of the supposed Russian attacks on hospitals, they could not do so. Subsequent images of the one hospital named showed that it appeared completely intact (Emma Aiden 2015). A strong symbiosis persists between the armed group’s front people, the embedded watchdogs and the western media.

Syrian ‘activists’ linked to the White Helmets and The Syria campaign seem to have been operating in areas held by the al Qaeda group Jabhat al Nusra, and assisting that group (Sputnik 2015). Video published on an alleged chlorine gas attack begins ‘with the White Helmet logo and continues with the logo of Nusra’. The small group of White Helmets, on the Syrian side, have been described as ‘a small rescue team for Nusra/Al Qaeda’; but on the US side the main function is online propaganda (Sterling 2015a). Online video shows White Helmet volunteers removing a body just seconds after an apparent execution by Jabhat al Nusra (Live Leak 2015). Those are the actions of a ‘humanitarian NGO’ deeply embedded with providing assistance to al Qaeda.

Media and ‘watchdog NGOs’ backing the strategic ambitions of the big powers remain essential to propaganda in the dirty war on Syria. They often operate in tandem, as sources, commentators and megaphones for the ‘regime change’ campaign. Not only do they rely on overtly partisan sources, like the one man band in England, the ‘Syrian Observatory on Human Rights’, they also engage directly in media fabrications, as the BBC and White Helmet examples show. The older human rights ‘watchdogs’, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have also backed multiple fabrications, drawing on misinformation from the al Qaeda groups. They have shown little concern over criticisms of their conflicts of interest, as their directors and advisers come and go from the US State Department.

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This chapter examines and documents the Houla massacre of May 2012, a terrible incident in the Syrian Crisis which came closest to attracting UN intervention. The analysis here seeks to include all relevant evidence, both from witnesses and on the UN processes. A series of appalling civilian massacres during the conflict helped set the tone for another round of ‘humanitarian intervention’ or ‘responsibility to protect’ debates.

The killings at Houla deserve close attention. However, because of NATO’s abuse of the ‘no fly zone’ authorisation for Libya and the wider geo-politics of Syria, Russia and China would not allow a similar UN Security Council authorisation of force. As the US did not want another prolonged ground war, big power intervention remained indirect, through proxy militias. While the Syrian army attacked those armed groups, those groups carried out public executions and constantly tried to blame the Syrian Army for attacks on civilians.

In Chapter 3 pertaining to the Islamist insurrection in Daraa, I explained how the centre of this insurrection spread up into the Homs area. Many Homs residents became terrified by the sectarian-genocidal slogans of ‘Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the tomb’. Reports of these slogans appeared in the US media from May 2011 onwards (Blanford 2011; Eretz Zen 2012; Adams 2012; Wakefield 2012). These FSA groups, with their al Nusra partners, did indeed drive Christians to Beirut and slaughtered Alawis and many other pro-government people. The Orthodox and Catholic churches blamed Farouq for the large scale ethnic cleansing of more than 50,000 Christians from Homs (CNA 2012). They began to impose an Islamic tax (Spencer 2012). A local analyst concluded most of Farouk were sectarian Salafis, armed and funded by Saudi Arabia; while ‘Khalid Ibn al-Walid remained loyal to and supported by the Muslim Brotherhood’ (Mortada 2012). Genocidal slogans and actual ethnic cleansing would never have come from ‘moderate’ religious people, let alone a secular revolution.

The Houla Massacre

After the Syrian Army had driven the FSA groups out of Homs, and on the eve of a UN Security Council meeting on Syria, a dreadful massacre of more than 100 civilians took place at the village of Houla, on the Taldou plains just north-west of Homs. The Houla massacre (25 May 2012) became important to ‘Responsibility to Protect’ discussions, as it formed the basis of a failed attempt to authorise UN intervention to protect civilians, based on the claim that the Syrian Government had massacred civilians. Evidence to back that claim, however, was hardly clear.

The governments of Britain, France and the USA immediately blamed the Syrian Government. In what has been called the ‘western and Arab media narrative’ the victims...
were killed by army artillery (Correggia, Embid, Hauben and Larson 2013). The Syrian Government, in turn, accused the foreign-backed terrorists, in particular the groups that had been driven out of Homs. Syria’s Foreign Ministry said the army clashed with ‘hundreds’ of armed men who committed Friday’s massacre. The killers used knives, which they said was a ‘signature’ of Islamist militant attacks (Reuters 2012). The Government told the UN ‘the victims were reportedly killed by terrorists numbering between 600–800, who had entered Al-Houla previously from the villages of Al-Rastan, Sa’an, Bourj Qaei and Samae’leen, among other locations’. The General Command of the armed forces held an inquiry (HRC 2012a: 6).

Allegations of Islamist ‘false flag’ provocations had been made before. Mother Agnes-Mariam de la Croix, the mother superior in charge of an ancient monastery in Qara, south of Homs, had observed the ethnic cleansing of Christians in Homs, and had grave suspicions about who was behind the killings at Houla. She had said publicly that Syrian Christians had been pressured to join FSA groups, had been used by the rebels as human shields and that Christian homes had been taken over by ‘Sunnis’. She denounced their ‘false flag’ crimes in 2011 (SANA 2011; AINA 2012), pointing out that the Catholic Media Centre had a list of names of hundreds of murder victims, many of whose images had been later used in [FSA] media setups (SANA 2011).

Western media reports, however, generally dismissed statements from Damascus. Several governments expelled Syrian diplomats, in moves designed to isolate the government. The UN Security Council said it:

condemned in the strongest possible terms the killings … in attacks that involved a series of Government artillery and tank shellings on a residential neighbourhood … [and] also condemned the killing of civilians by shooting at close range … [this] constitutes a violation of applicable international law and of the commitments of the Syrian Government (UNSC 2012).

France’s representative at the UN, Martin Briens, said: ‘Tanks and artillery cannons from the government shelled residential areas killing civilians’ (RT 2012). Britain’s envoy Mark Lyall Grant said ‘there is not the slightest doubt that there was deliberate government shelling against a civilian neighbourhood’ (Cowan 2012).

These accusations were premature, betraying prejudice. Russia insisted on a UNSC briefing by UN Special Mission (UNSMIS) head, Norwegian General Robert Mood, who told them the victims included 49 children and 34 women, most of whom had been shot at close range or had their throats cut. Russian diplomat Aleksandr Pankin summarised: ‘very few of the people who died in Houla were killed by artillery shelling’ (RT 2012). From then, culprits in western media stories shifted to pro-government militia (shabiha). Britain’s Daily Telegraph blamed ‘Assad’s Death Squads’. The paper suggested a sectarian motive, from an opposition source: ‘They would fight for Bashar to the death. It is natural – they have to defend their sect’ (Alexander and Sherlock 2012).

The certainty of the British and French governments, and of the anti-government ‘activists’, was not evident in the statements of the head of UNSMIS. General Mood’s group visited the massacre site and heard two distinct stories. His public comments three weeks after the massacre deserve attention, given that the UN did not release the report to which he refers:

‘We have interviewed locals with one story and we have interviewed locals that have another story. The circumstances and … the facts related to the incident itself still remain unclear to us … we have sent [statements and witness interviews] as a report
This report was delivered to the UN Secretary General (UNSG 2012); yet it seems it was not received by the Security Council (Hauben 2012). Mood’s ambiguity may have been disconcerting for those wanting clear findings against the Syrian Government. On 1 June the Human Rights Council (three against and two abstentions) blamed the Houla killings on the Syrian Government (‘wanton killings … by pro-regime elements and a series of Government artillery and tank shellings’) before calling for a ‘comprehensive, independent and unfettered special inquiry’ (HRC 2012c). That was an odd coupling of prejudice and a pretence at fair inquiry. UNSMIS had its activities suspended and was disbanded in August, to be replaced by another Committee co-chaired by a US diplomat.

Circumstances and timing were certainly important. As the Syrian Army drove Farouq from Homs and into surrounding towns, Syrians turned out for the 7 May National Assembly elections. Those sections of the opposition aligned to the FSA called for a boycott, and armed groups threatened to enforce this (al Akhbar 2012). In the event, the ruling Ba‘ath party won 60% of the vote and their allied parties another 30%, though turnout was only 51% (Zarzar and al-Wahed 2012). There was reason to suspect enforcement of the threat, through reprisals against those who had participated and so lent legitimacy to the state.

Yet that line of inquiry was not pursued by the second UN inquiry. With three of the UNSC permanent members openly backing regime change in Syria, the debate was heavily politicised. The Houla massacre inquiry was taken over by a Human Rights Council Commission of Inquiry, co-chaired by US diplomat Karen Koning AbuZayd (HRC 2012a; HRC 2012b). Appointing a US delegate was a mistake, on the part of the UN. Karen Koning AbuZayd had worked for the UN for many years, but was explicitly listed as a USA delegate to the Commission. The US Government had, by this time, publicly blamed the Syrian Government for Houla, demanding that President Assad resign for ‘killing your fellow citizens’ (AP 2012) and, with Turkey, had ‘stepped up’ what it called ‘non-lethal aid’ to rebels in Syria (Barnard 2012). By any standard Washington was a belligerent party to the Syrian conflict. On principles of independence and avoiding conflicts of interest the Human Rights Council should not have incorporated a US representative.

Unlike UNSMIS, this Commission did not visit Syria. A review of evidence was carried out and eight additional interviews were conducted, at a distance from Syria. The interim report reflected some of the ambiguity of the UNSMIS team: ‘[W]e are] unable to determine the identity of the perpetrators at this time; nevertheless … forces loyal to the Government may have been responsible for many of the deaths’ (HRC 2012b: 10). This was an injudicious statement. The report blamed both government forces and anti-government groups for crimes of war, but came in more strongly against the Syrian government, relying on the formal duties of government to ‘prevent or punish’ violence, as well as not commit it (HRC 2012b: 23). That is, the ‘catch-all’ argument had it that the Government was ultimately responsible for all violence on its territory, regardless of killings by the anti-government armed gangs.

The Commission’s 15 August report firmed up against the Syrian Government, removing most of the earlier ambiguity, but without identifying perpetrators. They wrote:

The commission conducted eight additional interviews, including with six witnesses from the Taldou area, two of whom were survivors. They looked at a range of statements from ‘various sources’, including ‘international human rights NGOs (HRC 2012b: 64-65).
All statements, they said, were consistent with deaths being caused by government shelling and unidentified ‘shabiha’ forces. Even though they had heard evidence that the Al Sayed and Abdulrazzak families (the main groups of civilians killed) were government supporters, this committee concluded that the unidentified killers of those families ‘were aligned to the government’ (HRC 2012b: 67). They discounted evidence that FSA groups had committed the murders, claiming that ‘apart from two witnesses in the Government report, no other account supported the Government’s version of events’ (HRC 2012b: 10). The Government ‘was responsible for the deaths of civilians as a result of shelling’, they said; while as regards the ‘deliberate killing of civilians, the Commission was unable to determine the identity of the perpetrators … [but] it considered that forces loyal to the Government were likely to have been responsible for many of the deaths’ (HRC 2012b: 10).

A prominent witness presented by the anti-government side was 11 year old boy Ali Al Sayed, who says many members of his family were murdered. In an online video little Ali says:

‘There were tanks in the street, they shot at us with machine guns … soldiers came out … they fired 5 bullets on the door lock … arrested my brother … [and] my uncle … then my mum screamed at them … they then shot her 5 times, they shot her in the head … then he went to my brother and shot him … some of them were dressed as military, some had regular clothes, had shaved heads and beards, shabiha’ (Marchfifteen 2012).

He pretended to be dead, and thus escaped being murdered. Later he saw news on state television of his uncles having been murdered. His story is not consistent in several respects (Larson in Correggia, Embid, Hauben and Larson 2013: 20-28) and, at the end, with the help of some leading questions, he gives what appears to be a tutored appeal for foreign military intervention, the same openly stated aim of the FSA groups:

‘I demand that the international community stop the killing in Syria and in Houla … we are being killed … the international community is sitting, just talking and not doing anything … the people must fight for us, do what they say and protect us’ (Marchfifteen 2012).

Whatever the strengths or weaknesses of the boy’s story, Ali’s was hardly the only eyewitness account of the massacre. Further, it was quite false for the UN Commission of Inquiry to suggest that only ‘two witnesses … supported the Government’s version of events’. By that time there was public evidence from at least fifteen witnesses, broadly consistent with the account by the Syrian Government. Russian journalists tried to present their interview material to the Commission and apparently met with a lack of interest (Janssen 2012). The Commission claimed that the Russian reports ‘relied primarily on the same two witnesses as the Government’s report’ (HRC 2012b: 66). Yet a simple reading of a summary of evidence from the latter’s witnesses shows this to be false. Below is a summary of evidence from witnesses the UN Commission ignored. These accounts of ‘rebel’ culprits are broadly consistent with the account of the Government and often quite specific. Several gunmen are named.

**Inconvenient Evidence**

First, the Syrian news agency reported two unidentified people who feared for their safety. The first said the gunmen were locals plus a larger group from other areas. The locals assembled after noon prayers before attacking check-points. They then selected pro-government people, those who participated in elections or ‘didn’t give the gunmen money’. One was Haitham al-Housan. The bodies shown on television were of ‘people murdered by ter-
rorists along with the bodies of the gunmen killed in the initial conflict’ (SANA 2012). The second witness, a woman, saw the larger group attacking a check-point. They heard of people from Tal Dahab, Aqrab and al-Rastan. A man called Saiid Fayes al-Okesh fired a mortar and police responded; he was shot in the leg. Another gunman was Haitham al-Hallaq, who led a group of about 200. The victims belonged to the al Sayed family, with Muawiya al Sayed ‘a police officer who didn’t defect’ and others related to Meshleb al Sayed, who ‘recently became Secretary of the Peoples’ Assembly’. Other targeted groups included four households of the Abdelrazzaq family (SANA 2012).

Syrian television news showed interviews with two distressed male witnesses. The first man said:

‘The terrorists are from this area and all the areas around … a huge number of them, hundreds. They started to use shells and RPGs … hitting the houses with guns, machine guns … They killed people in their houses … some bodies have been burned’ (Syria News 2012: at 6.47).

The second man said:

‘A man, his brother, and nephew were killed in front of my sister … [another] was able to run away and hide … the United Nations, those observers, what are they doing while shells are hitting us?’ (Syria News 2012: at 7.35).

German journalist, Rainer Hermann, who speaks Arabic, interviewed witnesses from Houla within days of the massacre. His sources included Syrian opposition members who had rejected violence. He withheld their names. They said Islamist rebels had attacked three army checkpoints. His sources told him:

‘The massacre took place after Friday prayers … dozens of soldiers and rebels were killed … [in fighting of] about 90 minutes … those killed were almost exclusively families of the Alawite or Shia minorities … [including] several dozen members of a family which had converted to Shia Islam in recent years … and the family of a Sunni member of parliament, because he was considered a collaborator … after the massacre, the perpetrators filmed their victims, presented them as Sunni victims and spread their videos’ (Hermann 2012).

Hermann gave names to the gang leaders:

‘more than 700 gunmen under the leadership of Abdurrazzaq Tlass and Yahya Yusuf [Farooq leaders] came in three groups from Rastan, Kafr Laha and Akraba and attacked three army checkpoints around Taldou. The numerically superior rebels and the soldiers fought bloody battles … the rebels, supported by the residents of Taldou, snuffed out the families … [who] had refused to join the opposition’ (LRC 2012).

German journalist Alfred Hackensberger spoke with a man who had been given refuge in the Qara monastery headed by Mother Agnes Mariam. This man called ‘Jibril’ said:

‘The fighting began around noon, when the rebels, coming from Ar-Rastan and Saan, attacked the checkpoints … the rebels went to the hospital and killed patients there … several teams targeted and went in selected houses and started to shoot all of the inhabitants.’

He knew the Sajid’s personally.

‘They were Sunni Muslims, like all of us’, he says. ‘They were killed by them because they have refused to join the revolution. They’ve even murdered a Member of Parliament who … had refused the boycott of the FSA’.
Asked about the ‘regime loyalists’ claims, Jibril responded derisively:

Nonsense ... Houla is in rebel hands since December 2011 ... the Army would like to reclaim Taldou, but it has not been done ... many people know what really happened ... who’s there ... can only replay the version of the rebels. Everything else is certain death (Hackensberger 2012).

The Arabic speaking Dutch writer Martin Janssen constructed his view from three sources: the Catholic Fides news agency, information from refugees at the Qara monastery and the accounts of Russian journalists Musin and Kulygina. He questioned the shabiha story because many victims were Alawi, who are almost all pro-government. Fides had reported that ‘large groups of Syrian Alawites and Christians in the region were fleeing to Lebanon to escape the violence of armed gangs’, after the events at Houla (Janssen 2012). The Qara monastery told him witnesses said the army was absent in the region, with ‘Rastan and Saan ... under full control of the Free Syrian Army’. The armed groups attacked the al-Watani hospital and killed the guards. ‘Then they invaded the hospital where armed rebels killed all present and ... put the hospital on fire’ (Janssen 2012). At Tal Daw, near Houla, armed groups murdered all the Alawite families. The report from the monastery described the area around Qusayr as ‘in turmoil’ and wracked by sectarian violence (Janssen 2012).

Those Russian journalists, Marat Musin and Olga Kulygina from the Abkhazian Network News Agency (ANNA-News) had a camera crew in Houla on 25 May and took a number of witness interviews. Their sources make it very clear the murderers were Islamist ‘rebels’. An old woman called ‘The grandmother of Al-Hula’ said:

‘Checkpoint positions were attacked ... All the soldiers were killed, then they attacked our villages, torched a hospital ... Bandits killed our pharmacist ... [because] he had treated a wounded soldier Nobody but the army will help us ... They say there have been airstrikes! Lies, lies, lies. Liars, all of them come from Ar-Rastan’ (ANNA 2012).

Taldou resident Syed Abdul Wahab, said:

‘The terrorists want to come here ... to take power. We have always lived in peace. We cannot leave the house’.

A local woman from Al-Gaunt, next to Al-Houla, said:

‘Nine terrorists killed my relatives in the field. The bandits set fire to our houses and we fled ... we have a martyr, who was burned alive. Why, by what law did they die? Is this Islam? Is this justice?’ (ANNA 2012).

Another woman from Taldou they call Arifah told them she listened to the radio chatter from the ‘bandits’, before the massacre (Misin 2012a). They began by firing at the main checkpoint while a group from the al Hassan clan, led by Nidal Bakkur, attacked a ‘second checkpoint’ outside the village. The bandits lost about 25 people but after about two hours they had taken over both check-points. ‘They then proceeded to murder the Al-Sayed family which lived across the street from the police station’. Three families including about 20 children were murdered, along with another 10 from the Abdul Razaq family. That afternoon Abdul Razak Tlas, leader of the Farouq Brigade, arrived with 250 men from Ar-Rastan, Aqraba and Farlaha (Misin 2012a).

The city of Ar-Rastan had been abandoned by most civilians for some time, taken over by Islamists from Lebanon (Misin 2012b). Arifah said that by 8pm the murdered civilians and dead bandits had been taken to the mosque. They then filmed for the Qatari and Saudi television stations. On Saturday morning, when the UNSMIS observers arrived, ‘The fallen rebels involved in the action were presented as civilians, while the conquering rebels
dressed in army uniforms posed as defectors. They were surrounded by their family members who told the story of a government attack with heavy shelling and posed as victim’s relatives, while the relatives of the real victims were nowhere to be seen’ (Musin 2012a).

Violence continued after the UNSMIS visit. Musin and Kulygina later interviewed two wounded soldiers, a wounded policeman and another resident, who gave more detail of ‘rebel’ sniper attacks and murders, and of the ‘rebel’ escorts set up for the UN observers. They continued to identify attackers and victims. A group from the Al Aksh clan had been firing mortars and RPGs at the checkpoints. All checkpoint prisoners were executed: a Sunni conscript had his throat cut, while Abdullah Shaui of Deir-Zor was burned alive (Maramus 2012; Musin 2012b). The police officer said ‘the attackers were from Ar-Rastan and Al-Hula. Insurgents control Taldou. They burned houses and killed people by the families, because they were loyal to the government’ (Musin 2012b).

The resident saw the clashes from the roof of the police station:

‘Al Jazeera aired pictures and said that the Army committed the massacre at Al Hula ... in fact, they [the gunmen] killed the civilians and children in Al-Hula. The bandits ... steal everything ... most of the fighters are from the city of Ar Rastan’ (Maramus 2012; Musin 2012b).

The second UN inquiry ignored these 15 witnesses, who told of specific perpetrators with clear political motives. An outline of major reports and their associated evidence is below.

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<th>Source/report</th>
<th>Method and conclusion</th>
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<td>Mother Agnes Mariam</td>
<td>FSA had previously attacked Christians and was engaged in ‘false flag’ attacks, falsely blamed on the government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most western media reports</td>
<td>Massacre by ‘Assad’s death squads’</td>
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<tr>
<td>British and French government</td>
<td>Massacre resulted from Government shelling of civilian areas; later changed this to ‘regime thug’ attacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN Special Mission on Syria (UNSMIS), Gen. Robert Mood</td>
<td>Went to massacre site, heard stories that blamed both sides. Could not resolve the two versions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN HRC Commission of Inquiry</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSA video, on Al Jazeera and elsewhere</td>
<td>Show young boy Ali al Sayed, he blames ‘shabiha’ in army clothes with shaved heads and beards.</td>
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Dissent at the UN

The partisan report clearly influenced UN discussions. Although the HRC passed a motion with a strong majority, condemning the Syrian Government, the dissenting comments were significant. Russian representative Maria Khodynskaya-Golenischv (UNTV 2012: 7.00 to 8.10) said

‘we cannot agree with the one-sided conclusions put out in the resolution concerning the Commission on the Houla tragedy ... We believe that the question of guilt is still open. An investigation should be carried out thoroughly ... unfortunately some states are de facto encouraging terrorism in Syria therefore we have no doubt that the episode in Houla has definitely been whipped up in the media and has been used to carry out force against this country.’

The delegate from China (UNTV 2012: 13.25 to 15.50) also flagged that country’s intention to vote against the resolution, as there was a need ‘for a political solution ... [and an] immediate end to violence ... putting pressure on one party for the conflict will not help solve the problem’. The Cuban delegate (UNTV 2012: 16.05 to 18.50) said:

‘there are parties that are interested in not fostering the path of dialogue and understanding ... [some saying clearly they want] regime change, and even promoting the idea of military intervention with the use of force to impose on the Syrian people decisions that are being taken outside the country’.

The Indian delegate (UNTV 2012: 19.00-21.30), who abstained, said India had given:

‘unqualified support to the joint missions’ but urged the Human Rights Council to ‘always act with complete impartiality, in order to maintain its credibility and retain the trust and confidence of all ... [there is a need for] a balanced and impartial reso-

lution that can help start a meaningful political process in Syria’

The Syrian delegation (UNTC 2012: 24.33-35.30) came out hardest against the resolution, saying that the Commission of Inquiry ‘didn’t even visit Syria’ and had ignored the Syrian inquiry. Referring to some ‘Arab co-sponsors’Syria said they had no right to ‘give advice’ because they were ‘directly involved in the killings of Syrian people, and criminals cannot be judges’, imposing sanctions and then ‘shedding tears about the humanitarian situation’. The refusal to condemn terrorism in Syrian reflected badly on the Council. Nevertheless, the big powers had the numbers, with 41 voting in favour, three against and three abstentions. The resolution was adopted but no UNSC action was possible because of opposition from two of the five permanent members of the Security Council, Russia and China.

The unsatisfactory UN process does not negate the fact that strong prima facie evidence emerged against particular groups and individuals. Witnesses identified as perpetrators four local gunmen (Haitham al-Housan, Saiid Fayes al-Okesh, Haitham al-Hallq and Nidal Bakkur) along with groups from two clans (the al Hassan and the al-Aksh), plus a large Farouq group led by Abdurrazzaq Tlass and Yahya Yusuf. Their motive was to punish pro-government villagers, in particular the al-Sayed and Abdulrazzak families, then to set up a scene to falsely blame the government for their own crimes. The Houla massacre did not result in a Libyan-styled intervention, but false accusations afforded temporary impunity to the killers and created a great risk that military intervention could have been set in play.

The Aftermath

Houla set the tone for a series of similar ‘false flag’ massacres. When the August 2012 massacre of 245 people in Daraya (Damascus) came to light, western media reports quick-
ly suggested that ‘Assad’s army has committed [another] massacre’ (Oweis 2012). However that story was contradicted by British journalist Robert Fisk, who observed that the FSA had slaughtered kidnapped civilian and off-duty soldier hostages after a failed prisoner swap (Fisk 2012). Similarly, the 10 December 2012 massacre of 120 to 150 villagers in Aqrab (less than 15 kilometres from Houla, and also at that time under ‘rebel’ control) was also blamed by ‘activists’ on the Syrian Government.

The New York Times suggested ‘members of Assad’s sect’ were responsible (Stack and Mourtada 2012). In fact, as British journalist Alex Thompson (2012b) later reported, from the tightly corroborated evidence of survivors, the FSA (including foreign fighters) had held 500 Alawi villagers for nine days, murdering many of them as the army closed in and the FSA fled. In this case those of ‘Assad’s sect’ were the victims, just as the victims at Houla had been mostly government supporters and their families.

The Houla massacre illustrates great dangers in the practice of the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ doctrine, when the big powers have proxy armies in the field. The idea that almost any sort of atrocity could be blamed on the Syrian Government, with little fear of contradiction in the western media, must have played heavily on the minds of Islamist armed groups. Farouq in particular was very media savvy, regularly producing videos for the television networks of Qatar (Al Jazeera) and Saudi Arabia (Al Arabiya). Up against a superior national army, which was not disintegrating along sectarian lines, Farouq and the others were in desperate need of military backing. Inflaming moral outrage against the Syrian Government just might bring in NATO air power, as it had in Libya. In the meantime, they could carry out major crimes with impunity.

The failure of UN processes to recognise the UN’s own role, in fomenting both impunity and escalation of the violence, further discredited the ‘no fly zone’ idea, which had been cynically exploited in the Libyan intervention. After Houla, while the propaganda war continued, there was no real hope of Security Council authorised intervention in Syria. The next major incident, involving the use of chemical weapons in ‘rebel’ occupied East Ghouta, more than a year later, would have as its reference point a unilateral ‘red line’ decree by Washington. Houla in many respects marked the failure of attempts to build any real UN-sanctioned ‘official truth’ over the conflict in Syria.

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The dirty war on Syria has involved repeated scandals, often fabricated against the Syrian Government to help create pretexts for deeper intervention. Perhaps the most notorious was the East Ghouta incident of August 2013, where pictures of dead or drugged children were uploaded from an Islamist-held agricultural area east of Damascus, with the claim that the Syrian Government had used chemical weapons to murder hundreds of innocents. The incident generated such attention that direct US intervention was only averted by a Russian diplomatic initiative. The Syrian Government agreed to eliminate its entire stockpile of chemical weapons (Smith-Spark and Cohen 2013), maintaining that it had never used them in the recent conflict.

Indeed, all the independence evidence on the East Ghouta incident (including evidence from the US and the UN) shows that the Syrian Government was falsely accused. This followed a series of other false accusations, ‘false flag’ claims recorded by senior nun Mother Agnes (SANA 2011), a shamefully biased investigation into the Houla massacre (see Chapter 7) and failed or exposed attempts to blame the Syrian Government over ‘Islamist insurgent’ group killings, for example at Daraya and Aqrab (Fisk 2012; Thompson 2012). However the Islamist groups’ use of chemical weapons was mostly dismissed by the western powers, and that stance has been reflected in almost all western media reports. Further, because the chemical weapon claims have been repeated for years, public perceptions seem to have little reference to facts based on evidence. After a little background, let’s consider the independent evidence on the East Ghouta incident, in some detail. Arising from that evidence we are led to another serious crime of war, the fate of the dead or drugged children portrayed in those infamous images.

Chemical Weapons in Syria

Chemical weapons are a crude relic of an earlier era, such as the trench warfare of a century ago. They have no utility in urban warfare, where an army hunts armed groups amongst streets, buildings and civilian populations. No real utility, unless a ruthless party wants to create general panic or make false claims. In the case of the Syrian Arab Army, their conventional weapons were far superior to crude chemical weapons and their urban warfare training, including that done in Iran, had the aim of rooting out terrorist groups, building by building (al Akhrs 2013). A stockpile of chemical weapons had been kept as a deterrent to Israel, which holds nuclear weapons; but there had been no proven use of them in recent decades.

By mid-2013, the war had turned in favour of the Government. Although parts of Aleppo, East Damascus and some parts of eastern Syria were held by various ‘Islamist groups’, the
Army had secured the major populated areas in western Syria and had closed much of the armed traffic across the mountainous Lebanese border. Along the borders with states which backed the Islamists – Turkey, Israel and Jordan – there were regular incursions, but they were mostly beaten back by the Syrian Army. Over May-June 2013 the Army, backed by Lebanon’s Hezbollah, took back the city of Qusayr, south-west of Homs, from a combination of the Farouq Brigade and Jabhat al Nusra, including many foreign mercenaries (Mortada 2013).

In this context anti-government armed Islamist groups were accused of using chemical weapons. The main foreign support group for the Syrian Islamists, Jabhat al Nusra, were reported to have seized a chemical factory near Aleppo in December 2012 (Gerard Direct 2012). Then in March the Syrian Government complained to the UN that sarin gas had been used in a major battle with the Islamists at Khan al Assal, west of Aleppo. The Syrian news agency SANA reported that terrorists had fired a rocket ‘containing chemical materials’, killing 16 people and wounding 86, soldiers and civilians. The death toll later rose to 25 (Barnard 2013). The Muslim Brotherhood-aligned British-based source, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, along with other anti-government ‘activists’, confirmed the casualties but insinuated that the Syrian Army might have used the weapons and ‘accidentally’ hit themselves (Barnard 2013). Western media reports mostly elevated the Islamist counter-claims to the level of the Government’s report. In April 2013 Jabhat al Nusra was reported as having gained access to chlorine gas (NTI 2013).

About Khan al Asal, a 19 March statement from Syria’s UN Ambassador, Bashar al Ja’afari, said that: ‘armed terrorist groups had fired a rocket from the Kfar De’il area towards Khan Al Asal (Aleppo district) ... a thick cloud of smoke had left unconscious anyone who had inhaled it. The incident reportedly resulted in the deaths of 25 people and injured more than 110 civilians and soldiers who were taken to hospitals in Aleppo’. The following day the Syrian Government ‘requested the Secretary-General to establish a specialized, impartial independent mission to investigate the alleged incident’ (UNMIAUCWSAA 2013: 2-3).

Almost immediately following this, from 21 March onwards, the governments of the USA, France and Britain (all of which were by then directly or indirectly supporting the Islamist groups) began to add a series of incidents, claiming the use of chemical weapons in Syria (UNMIAUCWSAA 2013: 2-6). Washington repeatedly claimed there was ‘no proof’ the ‘rebels’ were responsible for chemical weapon use. They sought to turn the accusations against the Syrian Government. However, in an interim statement in May, UN investigator Carla del Ponte said she had testimony from victims that ‘rebels’ had used sarin gas (BBC 2013). Then in May, Turkish security forces were reported to have found a 2kg canister of sarin, after raiding the homes of Jabhat al Nusra fighters (RT 2013). In July Russia announced it had evidence that Syrian ‘rebels’ were making their own sarin gas (Al Jazeera 2013).

Despite dissatisfaction over the Houla inquiry the previous year the Syrian Government invited UN inspectors to visit the Khan al Asal attack site. Details were organised and the UN’s Special Mission finally arrived in Damascus on 18 August 2013. The Mission ‘intended to contemporaneously investigate the reported allegations of the use of chemical weapons in Khan Al Asal, Saraqueb and Sheik Maqsood’, that is, at three of the 16 reported sites where such attacks ‘were deemed credible’. However, ‘after the tragic events of 21 August 2013’ the UN Secretary General directed the group to investigate the East Ghouta incident ‘as a matter of priority’ (UNMIAUCWSAA 2013: 7-8). This incident derailed the initially planned investigations. Despite the implausibility of the Syrian Government launching a chemical weapons attack, just as it had invited UN inspectors in Damascus, the new claims gained world attention.
The East Ghouta Incident

The main armed Islamist group which controlled the area, the Saudi-backed Islamic Front (Liwa al Islam), blamed the Government for gassing children. Photos of dozens of dead or injured children were circulated. Supporting the ‘rebel’ accusations, the US government and the US-based Human Rights Watch blamed the Syrian government. Human Rights Watch said it had ‘analyzed witness accounts of the rocket attacks, information on the likely source of the attacks, the physical remnants of the weapon systems used’, and claimed the rockets used were ‘weapon systems known and documented to be only in the possession of, and used by, Syrian government armed forces’ (HRW 2013a). Much the same was said by the US Government. Close links between the two should tell us that this was more collaboration than corroboration. A group of Nobel Prize winners would later accuse Human Rights Watch of running a ‘revolving door’ between its offices and those of the US government (Pérez Esquivel and Maguire 2014).

The New York Times backed the US Government claim ‘that only Syrian government forces had the ability to carry out such a strike’ (Gladstone and Chivers 2013). The paper claimed vector calculations of the rocket trajectories indicated they must have been fired from Syrian Army bases in Damascus (Parry 2013). Yet studies at MIT quickly showed the rockets to have a much shorter range than was suggested. The NYT retreated from its telemetry claims saying, while ‘some argued that it was still possible the government was responsible’, new evidence ‘undermined the Obama administration’s assertions’ about the rocket launch points’ (Chivers 2013; also Parry 2013). The final MIT report was more emphatic, concluding 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’ (Lloyd and Postol 2014).

While western media outlets mostly repeated Washington’s accusations, independent reports continued to contradict the story. Journalists Dale Gavlak and Yahya Ababneh reported direct interviews with ‘doctors, Ghouta residents, rebel fighters and their families’ in the East Ghouta area. Many believed that the Islamists had received chemical weapons via Saudi intelligence chief, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, and were responsible for carrying out the gas attack (Gavlak and Ababneh 2013). The father of a rebel said his son had asked ‘what I thought the weapons were that he had been asked to carry’. His son and 12 other rebels were ‘killed inside of a tunnel used to store weapons provided by a Saudi militant, known as Abu Ayesha’ (Gavlak and Ababneh 2013). A female fighter complained they had no instructions on how to use chemical weapons. A rebel leader said much the same. Many of those interviewed reported that their salaries came from the Saudi government (Gavlak and Ababneh 2013).

Next a Syrian group, ISTEAMS, led by Mother Agnes Mariam, carried out a detailed examination of the video evidence, noting that bodies had been manipulated for the images and that many of the children appeared ill or drugged (ISTEAMS 2013: 32-35). The videos used ‘artificial scenic treatment … there is a flagrant lack of real families in East Ghouta … so who are the children that are exposed in those videos?’ (ISTEAMS 2013: 44). How is it that there are so many children without parents, the report asked? All reports came from ‘rebel’ controlled areas.

The medical office of the area claimed 10,000 injured and 1,466 killed, 67% of whom were women and children; while the Local Coordinating Committee (by this time an FSA linked group) said there were 1,188 victims. Videos showed less than 500 bodies, by no means all
dead (ISTEAMS 2013: 36-38). Even more striking was the subsequent absence of verified bodies. ‘Eight corpses are seen buried. [The] remaining 1,458 corpses, where are they? Where are the children?’ (ISTEAMS 2013: 41). A ‘rebel’ spokesperson claimed that ‘burials took place quickly for fear the bodies might decompose as a result of the heat’ (Mroue 2013).

The ISTEAMS report suggested a possible link with a large scale abduction of children in Ballouta, Northern Latakia, just two weeks prior to the East Ghouta incident. ‘We refer also the list of the victims of the invasion of 11 Alawite villages in Lattakia the 4th of August 2013, where 150 women and children were abducted by Jobhat Al Nosra’ (ISTEAMS 2013: 43). The report said:

‘the families of some adducted women and children ... recognise their relatives in the videos’,

and called for an ‘unbiased’ investigation to determine the identity and whereabouts of the children (ISTEAMS 2013: 44).

Later reports noted that the children abducted in northern Syria had been held in the northern town of Selma (Martin 2014; Mesler 2014), with one alleging the armed groups had drugged those children to create a video, sending the images to East Ghouta to be uploaded (Mesler 2014). If this were true, those children were never in the East Ghouta.

At the end of 2013, a Turkish lawyers and writers group issued a substantial report on crimes against civilians in Syria. A particular focus was the responsibility of the Turkish Government, which was backing the ‘rebel’ groups. The report concluded that ‘most of the crimes’ against Syrian civilians, including the East Ghouta attack, were committed by ‘armed rebel forces in Syria’. The Saudi backed group Liwa al Islam, led by Zahran Alloush, was said ‘by several sources to be the organization behind the chemical attack (Peace Association and Lawyers for Justice 2013).

The US storyline received another blow, from within the US. Veteran North American journalist Seymour Hersh interviewed US intelligence agents and concluded that Washington’s claims on the evidence had been fabricated. Al Nusra ‘should have been a suspect’, he said, ‘but the [US] administration cherry picked intelligence to justify a strike against Assad’ (Hersh 2013). President Obama cited as evidence the Syrian Army’s preparation for a gas attack and ‘chatter’ on the Syrian airwaves at the time of the incident. However Hersh said he had found ‘intense concern’ and anger amongst US agents over ‘the deliberate manipulation of intelligence’. One officer said the attack ‘was not the result of the current regime’ (Hersh 2013). The White House backgrounder combined facts after the event with those before. Hersh concludes that the White House ‘disregarded the available intelligence about al-Nusra’s potential access to sarin and continued to [wrongly] claim that the Assad government was in sole possession of chemical weapons’ (Hersh 2013).

The UN special mission on chemical weapons returned to Syria in late September and investigated several sites, including East Ghouta. They decided to investigate seven of the initial sixteen reports (UNMIAUCWSA 2013: 10). This Mission was not briefed to determined responsibility, but rather to determine whether chemical weapons had been used and what had been the results. In a December 2013 report they stated that chemical weapons had been used in Syria, and specifically:

against civilians, including children, on a relatively large scale in the Ghouta area of Damascus on 21 August ... in Khan Al Asal on 19 March 2013 against soldiers and civilians ... in Jobar on 24 August 2013 on a relatively small scale against soldiers ... in Saraqueb on 24 August 2013 on a small scale, also against civilians ... [and] in
Ashrafiah Sahnaya on 25 August 2013 on a small scale against soldiers. (UNMI-AUCWSAA 2013: 19-21).

Notice that on three of these five occasions chemical weapons were used against soldiers. Logically those attacks came from groups which were fighting soldiers, not from government forces. A later report for the Human Rights Council (February 2014) noted that the chemical agents used in Khan-Al-Assal attack ‘bore the same unique hallmarks as those used in al Ghouta’; however they could not determine the perpetrator (HRC 2014: 19). The independent evidence was overwhelming and inescapable: chemical weapons had been used in East Ghouta, but the charges against the Syrian Army were fabricated.

<table>
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<th>Source/report/evidence</th>
<th>Method and conclusion</th>
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<tr>
<td>Carla del Ponte (UN)</td>
<td>Pre-East Ghouta: ‘Rebels’ believed to have used sarin gas in North Syria</td>
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<td>Various news reports</td>
<td>Pre-East Ghouta: ‘Rebels’ (al Nusra) arrested in Turkey with sarin gas</td>
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<td>‘Syrian Rebels’ and associates</td>
<td>1,300+ killed, including children, from Government CW shelling. However only 8 bodies are publicly buried.</td>
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<td>Human Rights Watch</td>
<td>The weapons used were only in possession of the SG</td>
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<td>New York Times</td>
<td>Telemetry evidence links attacks to SG bases (the MIT studies force NYT to modify this claim)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lloyd and Postol (MIT)</td>
<td>Rockets used had limited range and could not have been fired from suggested Syrian Government positions.</td>
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<td>Gavlk and Ababneh (MINT Press)</td>
<td>CW had been supplied by Saudis to ‘rebel’ groups, some locals had died due to mishandling</td>
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<td>Mother Agnes / ISTEAMS</td>
<td>Images were contrived, no social context, only eight people buried – who and where are the children?</td>
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<td>ISTEAMS, Martin, Mesler</td>
<td>Parents identified children in photos as those kidnapped in Balouta (Latakia), two weeks earlier</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seymour Hersh (LRB)</td>
<td>Interviewed US officials. Intelligence was manipulated to blame President Assad, false claims used.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Turkish lawyers and writers group (PALJ)</td>
<td>Saudi backed ‘rebel’ group Liwa al Islam believed to be responsible.</td>
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<td>UN Dec 2013 report on CW attacks in Syria</td>
<td>CW were used in East Ghouta; three of five CW attacks were ‘against soldiers’ or ‘against soldiers and civilians’</td>
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<tr>
<td>HRC Feb 2014 report</td>
<td>chemical agents used in Khan-Al-Assal attack ‘bore the same unique hallmarks’ as those used in East Ghouta</td>
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Evidence independent of the Syrian Government came from Syrian, Jordanian, Turkish and US sources, and from a United Nations team. Further, many of the images of sick of dead children were not reliably linked to East Ghouta. Nor is there independent verification of who those children are and what happened to them. The weight of evidence shows this to be another ‘false flag’ incident, designed to attract deeper foreign intervention. The scale of independent reporting which undermined claims against the Syrian Government stands in marked contrast to the boastful self-publicity by ‘rebels’ of their own atrocities: beheadings, public executions, truck bombings, mortaring of cities, bombing of hospitals and destruction of mosques and churches. The fact that the Syrian Army strongly contests civilian atrocity claims (the treatment of captured fighters is another matter), while many of the ‘rebels’ publicise their own atrocities, sets a distinct background to these controversies.
Chemical fabrications and Syria’s Missing Children

After the East Ghouta incident, Islamist groups supported by a range of states opposed to Syria maintained the chemical accusations. Jabhat al Nusra claimed the chemicals they were caught with in Turkey were ‘not for making sarin gas’ (Today’s Zaman 2013). Yet video evidence from south Syria showed al Nusra using chemical weapons against Syrian soldiers (Turberville 2014). In July 2014 barrels containing sarin were reported as discovered in parts of ‘rebels-held Syria’ (RT 2014). Then in 2015 Iraqi Kurds reported the other main al Qaeda group ISIS as using chemical weapons (Solomon 2015; Ariel 2015). Kurdish fighters seized chlorine canisters after a suicide bomb attack which left them ‘dizzy, nauseous and weak’ (Akbar 2015).

Anti-Syrian ‘activists’, plus US-based NGOs such as Avaaz, the Syria Campaign and The White Helmets, repeated and extended the accusations, urging a Libyan styled ‘no fly zone’ (NFZ Syria 2015; White Helmets 2015), clearly intended to topple the Government in Damascus. By 2014 there seemed little chance that would happen. In April 2014 Al Jazeera again accused the Syrian Government of using chlorine gas (Baker 2014), while anonymous activists’ accused the Syrian army of a poison gas attack (Mroue and Lucas 2015). In neither case was there any independent verification. Nevertheless, media channels repeated the initial claims of the East Ghouta incident, as though they were fact, oblivious to the evidence. An April 2015 article in the UK Guardian, for example, claimed in its backgrounder that the Syrian Government had used chemical weapons and ‘killed up to 1,400 people in August 2013’ (Black 2015). Such was the reckless disinformation.

The smokescreens around chemical weapons effectively derailed reasonable western discussion about the war in Syria; and perhaps that was the point. It is sad, though, that reasonable discussion of the evidence should matter so little. Further, the constant stream of fabrications have certainly aggravated and helped prolong the violence. Islamist militia carry out their crimes with relative impunity, regularly blaming them on the Syrian Government.

Another crime has been buried by the chemical fabrications: the fate of the children kidnapped in Ballouta. Even Human Rights Watch reported this crime (HRW 2013b), if not the link to the children said to have been injured or killed in East Ghouta. This mass kidnapping was just one of many by the armed groups. The victims are held for ransom, for prisoner exchanges, or simply slaughtered because they are thought be from pro-government families. However in the East Ghouta incident, several sources (ISTEAMS 2013; Martin 2014; Mesler 2014) link the Ballouta children to the photos of the dead or drugged little bodies said to have been in the East Ghouta.

That is, their images may have been uploaded from East Ghouta but the bodies were never there. While some of those kidnapped were released in a 2014 prisoner exchange, many are still held, reportedly in Selma. This is said to be why many families in northern Syria did not wish to publicly identify their children. They want to free those that have survived. Western media sources continue refer to ‘1,400’ dead, without names, but only eight bodies are known to have been buried.

In the fog of war, Mother Agnes Mariam has been right all along to insist on names and details of people killed, and not just a recital of numbers, as though these killings were a cricket match. Back in September 2013, her ISTEAMS group posed one of the most vital questions of this whole affair: ‘Eight corpses are seen buried’. [The] remaining 1,458 corpses, where are they? Where are the children?’ (ISTEAMS 2013: 41).
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A new version of 'humanitarian intervention', known as the 'responsibility to protect' (R2P), was developed at the turn of the 21st century. An invention of the big powers, with reference to the suggested humanitarian consequences of their supposed failures to intervene in the past, it became a tremendous moral argument for the 2011 intervention in Libya. That intervention, based on lies, was a disaster for the Libyan people. A similar course was attempted with Syria, but failed. Russia and China, in particular, were no longer prepared to play Washington’s game. However it may have sounded in theory, in practice this R2P emerged as a new tool of intervention. It carries great dangers, having helped incite ‘false flag’ massacres by armed groups in their search for greater foreign support. It has also helped undermine the international system which, since the 1940s, has been founded on principles of sovereignty and non-intervention.

In some respects it is extraordinary that, so soon after the 2003 invasion of Iraq on a manifestly false pretext (see Kramer and Michalowski 2005), an earnest debate began over how to deepen and sanctify the reasons for military intervention. The debate was extraordinary, in that relatively little attention was paid to the long history of false pretexts for intervention. Yet in many respects it was logical, as it appeals to a naïve social conscience while opening new avenues for big power ambition. The ‘double game’ of mixing false pretext, political ambition and public benefit rationale is an age-old tradition.

The recent debate has been mostly western referenced and often focussed on promotion of the R2P as ‘a new norm of customary international law’, even one of obligation (Loiselle 2013: 317-341). This has articulated a groundswell of western sentiment generally in favour of intervention, almost regardless of the detail. This was a reversal of trends established by the formal colonies in the post-colonial era. The Non-Aligned Movement of 118 nations, mostly former colonies, on the other hand, elevates non-intervention as a founding principle of nation-states (Köchler 1982). As an example of past debates, the major in-principle dispute between the United States and the Latin American states at all Pan-American conferences in the early twentieth century was Washington’s refusal to accept the principle of non-intervention. Finally, in 1933, the United States recognised that principle (Dreier 1963: 40-41). Of course, the US continued to intervene in Latin America after this, but that principle helped drive a search for new pretexts.

While the notion of ‘humanitarian intervention’ has been around for some time, the more specific doctrine of a ‘responsibility to protect’ is quite recent. Nevertheless, the two share similar rationales for foreign military intervention, always by the big powers but usually in the name of a wider group. In one North American view, contemporary ‘humanitarian intervention’ links up to earlier practise, for example by the British Empire against slavery (well, forgetting about the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries) and by the alleged idealism of US intervention in the Spanish-American war (Bass 2009). In this view humanitarian intervention was distinct from imperialism, yet opposed by both ‘realists’ and ‘leftists’. Bass quotes John Stuart Mill, the famous English liberal, an opponent of absolute sovereignty and of slavery, yet an advocate of humanitarian intervention:

Barbarians have no rights as a nation, except a right to such treatment ... [to] fit them for becoming one ... [we should] mediate in the quarrels which break out between foreign states, to arrest obstinate civil wars ... intercede for mild treatment of the van-
Mill’s view might be considered a predecessor of the ‘liberal imperialism’ argued by British writers (Ferguson 2004; Cooper 2002), though somewhat different to the arguments of North Americans such as Ignatieff (2005) and Ikenberry (2012), who tend to adhere to ‘hegemonic stability’ ideas. In this North American doctrine a benevolent superpower does not exploit its dominant role, but rather engages in self-sacrificing behaviour to provide ‘public goods’ to all (Keohane 1986).

In any case, ‘liberal imperialism’ does not sit well in the post-World War Two world, supposedly ordered by the United Nations Charter and the twin covenants of human rights. Both that Charter and those covenants begin with the right of states and peoples to self-determination. Critical perspectives also call for historical interpretations of ‘humanitarian intervention’ and of the ‘responsibility to protect’. Chomsky says such norms must be understood as historical parts of imperial doctrine. Most military aggressions, he writes, were ‘justified by elevated rhetoric about noble humanitarian intentions’ (Chomsky 2008: 48).

The idea of a ‘responsibility to protect’, however, was crafted in an era of clear recognition of self-determination and state sovereignty and, at the same time, conventions on war crimes, crimes against humanity and the newly-created crime of genocide. In this context, and following the mass killings in Cambodia and Rwanda, an ‘International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty in 2001 promoted the idea of ‘sovereignty as responsibility’, with a focus on violence within weak or emerging states. The World Summit of 2005 then stated:

Each individual state has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity … The international community should, as appropriate, encourage and help States … [and] we are prepared to take collective action … through the Security Council … should peaceful means be inadequate and national authorities are manifestly failing to protect their populations (UN 2005: 138-139).

The substance of this text was adopted in UN Security Council resolution 1674, the following year (UNSC 2006; see also ICRtoP 2014). Edward Luck (2009) observes that there is no necessary contradiction between this doctrine and state sovereignty, as the notion draws on conventional humanitarian law and ‘reinforces state sovereignty’. However he acknowledges a tension with a stricter sense of sovereignty, which he calls ‘Westphalian sovereignty’, and says the concern that R2P ideas ‘might be used by powerful states … to justify coercive interventions undertaken for other reasons is eminently understandable’ (Luck 2009: 17).

The R2P does not change the UN charter or the International Bill of Rights. It does, however, attract greater attention to the Chapter VII intervention powers of the Security Council. Yet the R2P has not altered the legal prohibition on military intervention, except in the case of self-defence or to prevent any attack on sovereignty which the Security Council regards as a breach of ‘collective security’. Both rationales aim to defend the international system, built on the integrity of nation-states.
In critical analysis, the first notable feature of the R2P doctrine is that it provides a new intervention rationale for the big powers, including the former colonial powers, to ‘prevent’ crimes which have traditionally been committed by those same powers. Rafael Lemkin – a Polish Jew, lawyer and creator of the concept of ‘genocide’ – said it had generally been the very strong states which engaged in wars of aggression, ethnic cleansing and genocide. Genocide, he said:

[was] not the result of the mood of an occasional rogue ruler but a recurring pattern in history ... a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups. (Frieze 2013: 138; Lemkin 1944: 79).

The victims were those in contested and occupied territories, while the perpetrators described were the Ottoman, Japanese, Mongol and Spanish empires (Frieze 2013: 80, 138, 168, 184). Bloxham, who also wrote of the Armenian genocide, concurs with Lemkin that genocide must be understood as the outcome of historical processes and ‘structured relationships’, rather than the ‘evil intentions of wicked men’ (Bloxham 2003: 89). This great crime was one of the dreadful but logical outcomes of projects of domination, driven by empires. With this history in mind it was audacious of the big powers to seek use of ‘impending great crimes’, including anticipated genocide, as a pretext for intervention. No entity has committed great crimes on the scale of empires, which are interventionist by character.

Conscious of the legacies of colonisation, slavery and genocide, leaders of the Non Aligned group of nations, almost all former colonies, have strongly defended the principle of non-intervention (e.g. Lage 2006). From the beginning of the Syrian conflict most of these nations dismissed the idea of big power intervention on humanitarian grounds, regarding the R2P as ‘a Trojan Horse’ created to help bring about ‘regime change’ (Mendiluza 2014).

A second notable feature of the R2P is that the driving force tends to come from the liberal side of western politics. This is distinct from the divisions that emerged between the big powers over the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but consistent with the argument from Bass (2009) that ‘humanitarian intervention’ has its roots in the liberal, as opposed to the ‘realist’, side of hegemonic culture. In this regard, former Human Rights Watch director Holly Burkhalter argued, on behalf of the US State Department, a very wide role for Washington’s military intervention, supposedly to prevent great crimes (See Chapter 6). The US military was more cautious, stressing a need for closer links to direct US interests (CFR 2000).

The Libyan intervention of 2011 drew heavily on R2P arguments, but NATO forces immediately went well beyond the UNSC’s ‘no fly zone’ mandate (see RT 2011). NATO air power and ground forces were decisive in destroying the government of Muammar Qaddafi and in dismantling the Libyan state. Former Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney (2012: 12-13) points out that Iraq, Libya and Syria were ‘old pro-Soviet regimes’ that US Pentagon officials from the early 1990s had wanted to ‘clean up’. Those plans were sharpened with the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. The Libyan pretext was alleged civilian massacres, in the wake of an al Qaeda style insurrection in Eastern Libya. Graham Cronogue (2012) citing the Guardian, a key supporter of ‘humanitarian intervention’, claimed that ‘hundreds of civilians’ had been killed in ‘protests’. Amnesty International (2011: 8) supported claims of ‘killings, disappearances, and torture’.

Yet most of those reports were tainted by conflicts of interest. The key source of information on supposed abuses by the Libyan Government, Sliman Bouchuiuir, drew his alle-
gations directly from opposition political forces (Nazemroaya 2012: 132-134). He would later admit there was no way to verify the data he had presented on killings (Teil 2011). After Qaddafi was killed and his government overthrown, French Amnesty Head Genevieve Garrigos admitted the claims that Qaddafi was using ‘African mercenaries’ to slaughter Libyans was ‘just a rumour spread by the media’ (in Truth Syria 2012). Across the Atlantic, Amnesty USA’s Director, Suzanne Nossel, was recruited directly from her position at the US State Department, where she had worked on US policy against Russia, Iran, Libya, Syria (Teil 2012: 146; Wright and Rowley 2012; Cartalucci 2012). The state of Qatar had helped supply arms to Libyan Islamists as well as propaganda through its media network, Al Jazeera (Fitrakis in McKinney 2012: 22).

The US Government, through its National Endowment for Democracy, had funded several NGOs in Libya, which also contributed to the campaign for ‘humanitarian’ intervention (Nazemroaya 2012: 147). Conflicts of interest in the Libyan R2P debate were rampant. Estimates of the loss of life, drawing on North American sources, say that around ten times as many died after the NATO intervention as before. Four years after that intervention Libya remains in a disastrous situation (Kuperman 2015).

Widespread critique has been expressed over Libya as a model of R2P. Dunne and Gelber say that the Libyan arguments undermined the idea of an R2P ‘norm’, with the NATO shift from a ‘no fly zone’ to regime change ‘betraying’ the UN trust and showing the partisan nature of intervention (Dunne and Gelber 2014: 327-328). Brown agrees, saying that the Libyan intervention demonstrates that the suggested ‘apolitical nature’ of a responsibility to protect ‘is a weakness not a strength … the assumption that politics can be removed from the picture is to promote an illusion and thus to invite disillusionment’ (Brown 2013: 424-425). Even in western circles the doctrine lost its intellectual gloss, after Libya.

The historical record can help us take this critique, along with recognition of R2P as a ‘permissive norm’ (Steele and Heinze 2014: 88, 109), one step further. Both humanitarian intervention and R2P arguments must be interrogated by the well-established principles of avoiding conflicts of interest and having regard to sufficiently detailed and relatively independent evidence of the matters in question. Further, these arguments might best be informed by the long history of imperial interventions. That applies to all such conflicts, including the partisan claims made over civilian massacres in Syria. (The fabrications regarding these massacres are documented in Chapters 7 and 8). Without such principled examination the debate can easily fall hostage to false pretexts of the ‘double game’, a historical tactic of the great powers.

In 2014 there was a change in the principal rationale for western intervention in Syria. It shifted from one which drew on the ‘responsibility to protect’ to one of ‘protective intervention’, in the name of suppressing terrorism globally. This argument trampled on international law, showing reckless disregard for the rights of other peoples and their nations. In Syria this new argument involved the bizarre claim that Washington was arming one group of Islamists so they could fight another, more extreme group.

Both humanitarian intervention and the more specific R2P doctrine carry a high risk of aggravating serious crimes, as the ‘false flag’ massacres in Syria have demonstrated. When outside powers back proxy militias against a nation-state, those militia can be encouraged to carry out with impunity the worst atrocities, or to manipulate combinations of their own crimes and events, blaming them on the target ‘regime’ in the hope of attracting greater military support from their sponsors. That contribution to aggravated violence vindicates the wide-spread insistence on respect for the principle of non-intervention.
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Syria’s health system has been battered by the war and undermined by Western economic sanctions, and the blame for this has been as polemicized as any other part of the conflict.

In December 2013 the then Syrian Health Minister, Dr Sa’ad al Nayef, told a visiting Australian solidarity delegation of which I was a part that foreign backed terrorists had recently detonated two truck bombs inside al-Kindi hospital in Aleppo, completely destroying the hospital and killing all health workers inside.

He showed us video of the FSA (Farouq Brigade) attacking Homs National Hospital on 6 April 2012, another of the damage to Al- Salamiyeh National Hospital (Hama) after an attack on 21 January 2013 and a third video of the damage to Al Zahrway Hospital (Damascus) after yet another terrorist attack on 5 May 2013. He gave the delegation details of the 26 November 2013 attack on Deir-Ateya Hospital in Rural Damascus, where 11 medical staff (2 Anesthesiologists, 3 Resident doctors, 4 Nurses and 2 Drivers) were stabbed to death.

Dr. al Nayef told us that, since the crisis began in March 2011, 67 of the country’s 94 national hospitals had been attacked and damaged, with 41 out of service. 174 health workers had been killed, 127 wounded and 33 kidnapped. In addition, 1921 primary health centres had been damaged, and 678 were out of service. 421 ambulances had been lost or were out of service, and 197 support vehicles had been damaged, with 169 out of service (al Nayef 2013). This scale of destruction indicates that the western-backed armed groups had been intent on destroying a functioning state, with little interest in trying to win public support.

However, if we read the stories from those who support the armed groups, one might think that the Syrian Government has been systematically destroying its own health system. Less than two weeks after our meeting with the Health Minister, Time magazine ran a story on Syria’s health crisis, drawing attention to an alleged Syrian Air Force strike on Dar al Shifa hospital (Aleppo), more than a year earlier, and demoralised doctors leaving the country (Baker 2014). A UN Committee on Syria issued a report in October 2013 accusing both sides of attacking hospitals and blaming the Syrian Government for a ‘discriminatory denial of the right to health as a weapon of war’ (OHCHR 2013). By this they meant attacks on paramilitary clinics and health centres taken over by the armed groups.

The Syrian armed forces have certainly bombed some hospitals, such as the SKT hospital at al Huda in eastern Aleppo (OHCHR 2013), after they were taken over and occupied...
by armed groups. There can be little doubt that the Syrian Government refuses to allow terrorist groups to run hospitals within Syria; but there is considerable doubt that this amounts to a breach of humanitarian law. The government would say that wounded members of the armed groups can be treated in government run hospitals. That is not a denial of health care. But the UN committee refers to ‘opposition’ groups, rather than illegal armed groups, confusing the issue. International Humanitarian law does have some ‘gaps’ in this area, but it is noteworthy that US law goes beyond Syrian practice, to prohibit the provision of ‘medicine’ to terrorist organisations (Lewis, Modirzadeh and Blum 2015). It is hard to imagine any state which would allow anti-government armed groups to seize and operate public hospitals.

At times hospitals seems to have become the very centre of the war. The UN reports that Farouq fighters:

> attacked the National Hospital in Jurat Al Shayyah [Homs] ... [and] after several days’ resistance from Government forces, the Al Farouk Brigade took control of the hospital. The Brigade took no precautions to avoid civilian casualties or to protect the sick and wounded during the attack. Government forces responded with aerial bombardment, which largely destroyed the hospital on 17 April (OHCHR 2013: 4).

Nevertheless, more often than not, UN agencies report stories from western-linked, anti-Syrian sources.

The armed groups have filmed their own destruction of hospitals, complaining that they were treating government soldiers or saying that they had been taken over by soldiers. We can hear Farouq (FSA) members celebrating with ‘God is Great’ chants as they blew up the public hospital in Qusayr, back in 2012 (OxTRX007 Youtube, 2012). They say: ‘Al Farouq blew up the national hospital, which used to be for the people but now is being used by Assad’s forces’ (Telegraph 2012). In mid-2013 another FSA group, without warning, attacked the National Hospital in Daraa. One of the insurgents said his group thought ‘there were approximately 50 patients in the hospital, and that all were affiliated with the Government’ (OHCHR 2013: 4).

The assault on al Kindi hospital (Aleppo) was reported in a variety of ways. The BBC used the headline: ‘Syria rebels take back strategic hospital in Aleppo’. Their introduction said the ‘massive suicide lorry bomb’ had managed ‘to seize back a strategic ruined hospital occupied by Assad loyalists’ (BBC 2013). Blowing up the entire building is an odd way to ‘seize back’ a hospital. Al-Kindi was said to have been ‘a disused building’ and ‘according to an unconfirmed report, 35 rebels died in the attack’ (BBC 2013).

Some translation of this story is needed. These ‘rebels’ were mostly non-Syrian terrorists of the al Qaeda franchise in Syria, Jabhat al Nusra, and their FSA allies. The ‘Assad loyalists’ were the staff of a large hospital, with Syrian Army security. Dr Malek Ali, Syria’s Minister for Higher Education said Al-Kindi was a functioning educational hospital co-managed by his ministry (Anderson 2013).

The group Physicians for Human Rights have blamed Government forces for ‘90% of the 150 attacks on hospitals’ (PHR 2014), but as they include al Kindi in this 90%, their overall credibility is very poor. There are multiple online videos of Islamists destroying al Kindi hospital. Four hundred anti-government fighters are said to have died in the struggle to control al Kindi hospital, but in the end the Islamists destroyed the hospital and then falsely blamed the Government, saying: ‘the regime is responsible for the destruction of the hospital because it turned it into a military base’ (Dayoub 2013).
The conflict has had a great impact on the local production of medicines. Before the crisis Syria was 90% self-sufficient in pharmaceuticals, with a mostly private industry hiring about 30,000 workers. The country was a significant exporter of medicines. However by 2013 capacity had shrunk drastically. Three quarters of the factories had shut, 20 factories in Aleppo alone, because of actual damage or fear of bombing, artillery and ‘theft and looting … [from] armed gangs’ (Hamada 2013).

On top of this, economic and trade sanctions from the US and the EU have damaged Syria’s health system and Syrian public health. The USA has the most comprehensive sanctions against Syria (OFAC 2013). Recent sanctions began in 2004 when the Bush administration decided Syria was ‘undermining US and international efforts to stabilize Iraq’. Then, in 2011, executive orders by the Obama administration were made ‘in response to the ongoing violence and human rights abuses taking place in Syria’. An August 2011 decree bans US persons (this includes companies with 10% or more US shareholding) from any ‘new investment’, the sale of ‘any services to Syria’, import of Syrian petroleum products and ‘any transaction’ or any financing linked to Syria. After this blanket ban, Washington allows some exceptions and ‘general licenses’ (OFAC 2013). The latter provision seems to include supplies to armed sectarian ‘rebels’.

The impact of US sanctions is reinforced by the European Union’s sanctions, compiled in a larger document (EU 2015) which includes measures against more than 30 countries. Generally the EU approach is a little more selective, setting lists of products and services, rather than a blanket ban. It imposes bans on arms, telecommunications equipment, the oil and gas industries, Syrian money, gold, diamonds and precious metals, and there are bans in finance, loans and insurance, access to airports for ‘certain flights’ and ‘certain persons’ and the freezing of the assets of ‘certain persons, entities and bodies’ (EU 2015). EU sanctions are complicated by the fact that many member states have their own different measures. However there do seem to be ‘gaps’ which allow some ‘aid’. Australian sanctions are closer to the European approach, with a list of sanctioned traded goods (DFAT 2015).

The impact of sanctions on Syrian health was spelt out in a 2012 academic paper, which sets this impact in context of some important achievements, before the crisis. Syria had impressive gains in public health from 1970 onwards, especially considering its relatively low income levels. A well-integrated and mostly public system was developed, and that brought results. Between 1970 and 2010 infant mortality declined from 132 to 14 and maternal mortality from 482 to 45 (Sen, al Faisal and Al Saleh 2012: 2).

However economic sanctions drove down the value of the Syrian pound and drove up the prices of basic foods and fuel. The study shows three ways in which sanctions have affected health in Syria.

First, many basic items (like milk, gas, rice and tomatoes) tripled in price over the first year of sanctions, as incomes declined, making these items unaffordable. That nutritional deficit has had a great impact, especially on mothers and babies.

Second, the cost of medicines for non-communicable diseases has shot up. Sanctions have blocked ‘the entry of essential medical supplies into the country, including those for cancer, diabetes and heart disease’. Many refugees had to flee the country, seeking urgent treatment.

Third, interruptions to power supplies in virtually all areas (often exacerbated by the armed groups’ attacks on power lines and stations) puts at risk vulnerable peoples’ lives in the extremes of winter and summer, when heating and cooling is most necessary (Sen, al
Despite these tremendous challenges, health services in Syria remain mostly free of charge, with tens of millions of free consultations each year. The WHO engages with the Syrian Government, the government managed Syrian Arab Red Crescent and provincial governors, to assist in the maintenance of services. For example in late October 2015 Daraa Governor Mohammad Khaled al-Hannous met with World Health Organization representative Elizabeth Hoff, to plan support health programs in that war-turn province (SANA 2015a).

Cuba, an international partner with great capacity in health and medicines, has backed Syria through assistance to rebuild its health services, pharmaceutical and biology sectors. In 2014 the Syrian Health Minister gave Cuba a list of needed items and the Caribbean country has already provided such things as dialysis machines and a range of medicines (Ismael 2014). China has also begun providing ‘medicines and health equipment’ to the Syrian Government (SANA 2015b). Some of the countries imposing sanctions hypocritically allow selective aid programs, which often go to Islamist controlled parts of the country. We should remember the great damage inflicted on the people Iraq in the 1990s, when child mortality doubled under pressure of sanctions (Alwan 2004: 22). These cruel measures should be removed immediately.

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"It is always difficult to play a double game: declaring a fight against terrorists and simultaneously trying to use some to place pieces on the Middle Eastern chess board to pursue their own interests ... [but do the] so-called moderate bandits behead people moderately?" Vladimir Putin (2015)

Reports that US and British aircraft carrying arms to ISIS were shot down by Iraqi forces (Iraqi News 2015) were met with shock and denial in western countries. Yet few in the Middle East doubt that Washington is playing a ‘double game’ with its proxy armies in Syria. A Yemeni AnsarAllah leader says ‘Wherever there is U.S. interference, there is al Qaeda and ISIS. It’s to their advantage’ (al-Bukaiti 2015). However key myths remain important, especially to western audiences. Engaging with those myths calls for reason and evidence, not just assertion.

There is no doubt that the Arab and Muslim peoples of the Middle East hate the terrorist monstrosity called ISIS, ISIL or DAESH. Polling by the Washington-based Pew Research Centre found that 99% of Lebanese, 94% of Jordanians and 84% of Palestinians had an ‘unfavourable’ view of ISIS. As Lebanon’s constitutional system requires sectarian identification it was also found that 98% of Lebanese Sunni Muslims rejected ISIS (Poushter 2015). That latter finding discredits the common western assertion that ISIS somehow springs from Sunni communities. Less than 1% in Lebanon, 3% in Jordan and 6% in Palestine viewed the banned terrorist group favourably. The remainder did not express an opinion. Of all Syria’s neighbours, Turkey had the lowest ‘unfavourable’ view of ISIS, at 73%; the favourable score was 8% (Poushter 2015). The aim of this chapter is to help clarify what role Washington has had in creating or turning loose this Frankenstein’s monster.

Washington maintains two closely linked myths as regards terrorism in the Middle East. Then there is a ‘fall-back’ story. The first ‘existential myth’ is that, from 2014, the US became engaged in a war against extremist terrorists, in both Iraq and Syria. This followed several years of trying to topple the Syrian Government by backing illegal armed groups, which it calls ‘moderate’. Through this myth the US claims to be playing a protective role for the benefit of the peoples of the region. The second myth is that there is a significant difference between the ‘moderate rebels’ the US arms, finances and trains, and the extremist terrorists (DAESH or ISIS) it claims to be fighting. These claims represented a shift in the rationale for the war on Syria, from one of ‘humanitarian intervention’ to a revival of the Bush era ‘war on terror’. The ‘fall back’ story, advanced by some of Washington’s domestic critics, is that US practice in the region has created a climate of resentment amongst orthodox Sunni Muslim communities, and the extremist groups emerged as a type of ‘organic reaction’ from those communities to repeated US interventions. This story hides the more damaging conclusion that Washington and its allies directly created the extremist groups.
However there is little point in simply asserting that last version, without evidence. The ‘existential myth’ of a western war on terrorism is so insistent and pervasive, and backed by such a commitment in political capital, arms and finance, that it is very difficult for western audiences to accept this new ‘war’ might be a charade. Further, diplomacy requires that stated policy positions be pursued to their logical conclusions, and that the aims be tested. For these reasons, the key elements of evidence regarding on Washington’s relationship with the sectarian terrorists should be documented.

It is certainly true that prominent ISIS leaders were held in US prisons. The Afghan recruiter for ISIS, Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost, spent three years in the US prison at Guantanamo (Bienaimé 2015). ISIS leader, Ibrahim al-Badri (aka Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi) is said to have been held for between one and two years at Camp Bucca in Iraq (Giovanni 2014). In 2006, as al-Baghdadi and others were released, the Bush administration announced its plan for a ‘New Middle East’, a plan which would employ sectarian violence as part of a process of ‘creative destruction’ in the region (Nazemroaya 2006). While there have been claims that al-Baghdadi is a CIA or Mossad trained agent, these have not yet been backed up with evidence.

Nevertheless, according to Seymour Hersh’s article, ‘The Redirection’, the US planned to make use of ‘moderate Sunni states’, in particular the Saudis, to contain alleged ‘Shiia gains’ in Iraq brought about by the 2003 US invasion. These ‘moderate Sunni’ forces would carry out clandestine operations to weaken Iran and Hezbollah, key enemies of Israel (Hersh 2007). This plan brought the Saudis and Israel closer as, for somewhat different reasons, both fear Iran.

In mid-2012, US intelligence reported two important facts about the violence in Syria. Firstly, most of the armed ‘insurgency’ was being driven by extremist al Qaeda groups, and second, the sectarian aim of those groups was ‘exactly’ what the US and its allies wanted. The DIA wrote:

‘The Salafist, the Muslim Brotherhood and AQI are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria ... There is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist principality in eastern Syria (Hasaka and Der Zor), and this is exactly what the supporting powers [The West, Gulf monarchies and Turkey] to the [Syrian] opposition want, in order to isolate the Syrian regime’ (DIA 2012).

The US also observed (and certainly did not stop) the channelling of arms from Benghazi in Libya to ‘al Qaeda groups’ in Syria, in August 2012. These arms were detailed as including 500 Sniper rifles, 100 RPG launchers with 300 rounds and 400 howitzers missiles, of 125mm and 155mm calibre, all shipped to the Ports of Banias and Borj Islam, in Syria (Judicial Watch 2015). According to Michael Flynn, the former head of the DIA, and consistent with that intelligence, President Obama made a ‘wilful decision’ to support al Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood and other ‘jihadist’ groups (Newman 2015). This all confirms motive, complicity and consistency of the process, from the early days of the Syrian conflict, building on former President Bush’s ‘New Middle East’ plan. Washington covertly approved the arming of al Qaeda groups in Syria, seeing its own advantage in that.

Probably the most convincing confirmation of US complicity with its terrorist ‘enemy’ has been the admissions from several senior officials that their main regional allies have financed ISIS. Those officials include the US Vice-President, the head of the US Armed Forces and the Chair of the US Armed Forces Committee. In September 2014 General Martin Dempsey, head of the US military, told a Congressional hearing ‘I know major Arab allies who fund [ISIS]’ (Rothman 2014). Senator Lindsey Graham, of the Armed Services
Committee, responded with a justification, ‘They fund them because the Free Syrian Army couldn’t fight [Syrian President] Assad, they were trying to beat Assad’ (Rothman 2014; Washington’s Blog 2014). These were honest, if criminal, admissions.

The next month, US Vice President Joe Biden went a step further, explaining that:

[Turkey, Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia] were so determined to take down Assad ... they poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens, thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad ... [including] al Nusra and al Qaeda and extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world ... [and then] this outfit called ISIL’ (RT 2014; Usher 2014).

Once again, these were consistent and credible admissions, except that Biden sought to exempt the US from this operation by blaming key allies. That caveat is simply not credible. The Saudis in particular are politically dependent on Washington and could not mount any major initiative without US approval. Not only that, the US systematically controls, by purchase contract and re-export license, the use of its weapons (Export.Gov 2015).

As discussed in Chapter 5, Washington’s relationship with the Saudis, as a divisive sectarian force in the region against Arab nationalism, goes back to the 1950s, when Winston Churchill introduced the Saudi King to President Eisenhower. More recently, British General Jonathan Shaw acknowledged the contribution of Saudi Arabia’s extremist ideology: ‘this is a time bomb that, under the guise of education. Wahhabi Salafism is igniting under the world really. And it is funded by Saudi and Qatari money’, Shaw said (Blair 2014). He was right.

Other evidence undermines western attempts to maintain a distinction between what came to be called the ‘moderate rebels’, by 2013 openly armed and trained by the US, and supposedly more extreme groups such as Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS. While there has indeed been some rivalry, the absence of real ideological difference is best shown by cooperation and mergers. For example the collection of US-backed groups called the ‘Free Syrian Army’ fought alongside ISIS and against the Syrian Army for several months in 2013, to gain control of Syria’s Menagh air base, near Aleppo (Paraszczuk 2013). Hoff points out that one of the ISIS commanders in the Menagh operation, Chechen Abu Omar al Shisani, ‘received American military training as part of an elite Georgian army unit in 2006’ and continued to receive US support in 2013, through his FSA alliance (Hoff 2015).

Long term cooperation between these ‘moderate rebels’ and the foreign-led Jabhat al-Nusra was seen around Daraa in the south, along the mountainous Lebanese border, in Homs-Idlib, along the Turkish border and in and around Aleppo. The words Jabhat al Nusra actually mean ‘support front’, that is, foreign support for the Syrian Islamists. Back in December 2012, as Jabhat al Nusra was banned in various countries, 29 of these groups reciprocated the solidarity in their declaration: ‘We are all Jabhat al-Nusra’ (West 2012). Soon after the 29 group signatories became ‘more than 100’ (Zelin 2012). There was never any real ideological difference between these sectarian anti-government groups.

The decline of the ‘Free Syrian Army’ network and the renewed cooperation between al Nusra and the string of reinvented US and Saudi backed groups (Dawud, the Islamic Front, the Syrian Revolutionary Front, Harakat Hazm) helped draw attention to Israel’s support for al Nusra, around the occupied Golan Heights. Since 2013 there have been many reports of ‘rebel’ fighters, including those from al Nusra, being treated in Israeli hospitals (Zoabi 2014). Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu even publicised his visit to wounded ‘rebels’ in early 2014. That led to a public ‘thank you’ from a Turkey-based ‘rebel’ leader, Mohammed Badie (Israel Today 2014). Semi-covertly, Israel backed all the armed groups against Syria, occasionally assisting them with its own missile attacks (Kais 2013).
The UN peacekeeping force based in the occupied Golan reported its observations of the Israeli Defence Forces ‘interacting with’ al Nusra fighters at the border (Fitzgerald 2014). At the same time, Israeli arms were captured by Syrian forces from the extremist groups (Kais 2012; Winer 2013). In November 2014 members of the Druze minority in the Golan protested against Israeli hospitals being used to help wounded al Nusra and ISIS fighters (Zoabi 2014). This led to questions by the Israeli media, as to whether ‘Israel does, in fact, hospitalize members of al-Nusra and Daesh [ISIS]’. A military spokesman’s reply was hardly a denial: ‘In the past two years the Israel Defence Forces have been engaged in humanitarian, life-saving aid to wounded Syrians, irrespective of their identity’ (Zoabi 2014). In fact, not even a humble farmer gets across the heavily militarised Occupied Golan border to retrieve a stray goat. ‘Humanitarian’ treatment for al Qaeda terrorists is different.

The artificial distinction between ‘rebel’ and ‘extremist’ groups has been mocked by multiple reports of large scale defections and transfer of weapons, to the extremists. In July 2014 one thousand armed men in the Dawud Brigade defected to ISIS in Raqqa (Hamadee and Gutman 2014; Ditz 2014). In November defections to Jabhat al Nusra from the US-backed Syrian Revolutionary Front were reported (Newman 2014; Sly 2014). In December, Adib Al-Shishakli, representative at the Gulf Cooperation Council of the exile ‘Syrian National Coalition’, said ‘opposition fighters’ were ‘increasingly joining’ ISIS ‘for financial reasons’ (Zayabi 2014). In that same month, the Al Yarmouk Shuhada Brigades, backed and trained for two years by US officers, were reported as defecting to ISIS, which had by this time began to establish a presence in Syria’s far south (OSNet 2014).

Then, over 2014-2015, three thousand ‘moderate rebels’ from the US-backed ‘Harakat Hazzm’ collapsed into Jabhat al Nusra, taking a large stock of US arms including anti-tank weapons with them (Fadel 2015a). Video posted by al-Nusra showed these weapons being used to take over the Syrian military bases, Wadi Deif and Hamidiyeh, in Idlib province (Bacchi 2015). Debka File, a site linked to Israeli intelligence, says the heavy weaponry provided to the Syrian ‘opposition’ by the USA, Israel, the Saudis, Jordan, Turkey and Qatar includes tanks, armoured vehicles, rockets launchers, machine-guns, anti-aircraft weapons and ‘at least four types of anti-tank weapons’ (Debka 2015). The scale and consistency of the ‘defections’ strongly suggests management to channel these arms, along with fighters, to make ISIS the best equipped group. A similar conclusion was noted by US Senator John Kiriakou (Sputnik 2015b).

Recruitment of fighters for ISIS was certainly a heavily financed affair, and not an ‘organic’ drift of resentful ‘Sunni’ youth. In late 2014 the Afghan Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost was said to be ‘leading efforts in northern Pakistan to recruit fighters for ISIS’ (Bienaimé 2015). Soon after this report, Syrian jihadist Yousaf al Salafi, arrested in Pakistan, said he had been hired to recruit young men in Pakistan to fight with ISIS in Syria. He says he received $600 for each fighter he sent, working with a Pakistani sheikh and using US money (Variyar 2015). Who knows what the middle-men took, but this sum is several times the salary of an average Syrian soldier.

As with Jabhat al Nusra, recruits came from a wide range of countries. Cuban journalists interviewed four captured ISIS jihadists from Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. They were recruited in a larger group which had passed freely through Turkey and across the border into Syria. They were assisted to participate in this ‘holy war’ by offers of a house, a good salary and a bride. More than 300 people were killed by their car bombs (PL 2015).

ISIS had US weapons by various means in both Iraq and Syria when, in late 2014, a ‘non-aggression pact’ was reported in the southern area of Hajar al-Aswad between ‘moderate
rebels’ and ISIS, as both recognised a common enemy in Syria: ‘the Nussayri regime’, a sectarian way of referring to Alawi Muslims. Some reported ISIS had purchased weapons from the ‘rebels’ (AFP 2015).

With ‘major Arab allies’ directly backing ISIS and a steady stream of fighters and arms passing to ISIS from the collapsing US-backed ‘moderate rebel’ groups, it is a small leap to recognise that US and ‘coalition’ fights to ISIS areas (supposedly to ‘degrade’ the extremists) might also have become covert supply lines. That is precisely what senior Iraqi sources began saying, in late 2014 and early 2015 (Iraq News 2014). In mid-2014 ISIS began seizing US weapons, but this was put down to incompetence on the part of the Iraqi Army (Sharma and Nestel 2014).

However, soon after that, US air drops of arms were seized by ISIS troops on the ground. Was this US incompetence or US planning? As reported by both Iraqi and Iranian media, Iraqi MP Majid al-Ghraoui said in January that ‘an American aircraft dropped a load of weapons and equipment to the ISIS group militants at the area of al-Dour in the province of Salahuddin’ (Sarhan 2015). Photos were published of ISIS retrieving the weapons. The US admitted seizures of its weapons but said this was a ‘mistake’ (MacAskill and Chulov 2014). Then in February Iraqi MP Hakem al-Zameli said the Iraqi army had shot down two British planes which were carrying weapons to ISIS in al-Anbar province. Again, photos were published of the wrecked planes. ‘We have discovered weapons made in the US, European countries and Israel from the areas liberated from ISIL’s control in Al-Baqdadi region’, al-Zameli said (FNA 2015a).

The Al-Ahad news website quoted Head of Al-Anbar Provincial Council Khalaf Tarmouz saying that a US plane supplied the ISIL terrorist organization with arms and ammunition in Salahuddin province (FNA 2015b). Also in February an Iraqi militia called Al-Hashad Al-Shabi said they had shot down a US Army helicopter carrying weapons for ISIL in the western parts of Al-Baqdadi region in Al-Anbar province. Again, photos were published (FNA 2015a). After that, Iraqi counter-terrorism forces were reported as having arrested ‘four foreigners who were employed as military advisors to the ISIL fighters’, three of whom were American and Israeli (Adl 2015). Israel’s link to ISIS seems to have passed well beyond its border areas. In late 2015 an Israeli Colonel Yusi Oulen Shahak was said to have been arrested with an ISIS group in Iraq.

The Iraqi Government linked militia said Shahak, from the Golani brigade, was a colonel who ‘had participated in the Takfiri ISIL group’s terrorist operations’ (FNA 2015c). Six senior Iraqi officials have been cited detailing US weaponry and intelligence support for ISIS. Captured ISIS fighters said the US had provided ‘intelligence about the Iraqi forces’ positions and targets’ (FNA 2015d). The western media avoided these stories altogether, because they are very damaging to Washington’s ‘existential myth’ of a ‘War on ISIS’. However they certainly help explain why Baghdad does not trust the US military.

In Libya in 2015 a key US collaborator in the overthrow of the Gaddafi government announced himself the newly declared head of the ‘Islamic State’ in North Africa (Sputnik 2015a). Abdel Hakim Belhaj was held in US prisons for several years, then ‘rendered’ to Gaddafi’s Libya, where he was wanted for terrorist acts. As former head of the al-Qaeda-linked Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), then the Tripoli-based ‘Libyan Dawn’ group, Belhaj was, in the past, defended by Washington and praised by US Congressmen John McCain and Lindsey Graham (Sputnik 2015a).

Evidence of the covert relationship between Washington and ISIS is substantial and helps explain what Syria’s Deputy Foreign Minister Faysal Mikdad called Washington’s ‘cosmetic
war’ on ISIS (SANA 2015). The terrorist group was herded away from the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq but allowed to operate freely in Eastern Syria, against the Syrian Army (Fadel 2015b). The extremist group is used to justify a foothold Washington keeps in the region, weakening both Syria and Iraq. But Washington’s ‘war’ on ISIS has been ineffective. Studies by Jane’s Terrorism and Insurgent database showed that ISIS attacks and killings in Iraq increased strongly in the months after US air attacks began (Lestch 2014). The main on-the-ground fighting has been carried out by the Syrian Army, with its allies, and the Iraqi armed forces, with support from Iran (Lister 2015).

All this has been reported perversely in the western media. The same channels that prominently report (virtually celebrating) the ISIS killing of Syrian soldiers have also claimed the Syrian Army was avoiding or ‘not fighting’ ISIS (Richter 2014; Vinograd and Omar 2014). That alleged ‘unwillingness’ was part of the justification for US bombing inside Syria, another false pretext. While it is certainly the case that Syrian priorities remained in the heavily populated west, multiple media reports make it clear that, well before the strikes by the Russian air force in October 2015, the Syrian Arab Army was the major force engaged with ISIS (YNet 2014; al Arabiya 2014; Reuters 2015), as also suffering the worst casualties from that terrorist group (Webb 2014). When it comes to avoiding ISIS, the reverse has been the case.

The evidence tells us that Washington’s lack of will against ISIS is linked to the fact that the terrorist group remains a key tool against the Syrian Government. That also explains why the US refuses to coordinate with the Syrian Army against ISIS (King 2015). This is consistent with the central ongoing aim of ‘regime change’ in Damascus or, failing that, dismemberment of the country. Such an aim was rejected by the US and others at a Vienna conference (Daily Star 2015); but US practice speaks louder than its words.

The contradictions of the US position – of claiming to fight ISIS while covertly protecting it – were thrown into sharp relief when in late September 2015 Russia decided to add air power to the Syrian Army’s efforts, against all the terrorist groups. When the US refused to cooperate with Russia, Washington’s media and NGO cheer squads immediately shifted their chorus of Syrian Government ‘killing civilians’ to that of Russia ‘killing civilians’. That had little effect on matters. At the time of writing, with that powerful Russian assistance, ISIS and the others are retreating and the Syrian Arab Army and its allied militia are gradually reclaiming areas that have been occupied for some time (AFP 2015).

Closer cooperation between Russia, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon’s Hezbollah threaten to seriously degrade US dominance in the region. In the Iraqi military’s recent offensive on ISIS-held Tikrit, the Iranian military emerged as Iraq’s main partner. Washington was sidelined, causing consternation in the US media. General Qasem Suleimani, head of Iran’s Quds Force was said to have been a leading player in the Tikrit operation (Rosen 2015). Not least amongst the new developments has been the creation of an intelligence centre based in Baghdad and shared by Russia, Syria, Iraq and Iran plus Hezbollah (4+1). This signals a new measure of independence for the Baghdad government, long thought to be a puppet captured by Washington (Boyer and Scarborough 2015).

This chapter has presented sufficient evidence for us to safely draw the following conclusions:

First, Washington planned a bloody wave of regime change in its favour in the Middle East, getting allies such as the Saudis to use sectarian forces in a process of ‘creative destruction’.
Second, the US directly financed and armed a range of so-called ‘moderate’ terrorist groups against the sovereign state of Syria while its key allies the Saudis, Qatar, Israel and Turkey financed, armed and supported with arms and medical treatment every anti-Syrian armed group, whether ‘moderate’ or extreme.

Third, ‘jihadists’ for Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS were actively recruited in many countries, indicating that the rise of those groups was not due to a simple anti-western ‘Sunni’ reaction within the region.

Fourth, NATO member Turkey functioned as a ‘free transit zone’ for every type of terrorist group passing into Syria. Fifth, there is testimony from a significant number of senior Iraqi officials that US arms have been delivered directly to ISIS. Sixth, the ineffective, or at best selective, US ‘war’ against ISIS tends to corroborate the Iraqi and Syrian views that there is a controlling relationship.

In sum we can conclude that the US has built a command relationship with all of the anti-Syrian terrorist groups, including al Nusra ISIS, either directly or through its close regional allies, the Saudis, Qatar, Israel and Turkey. Washington has attempted to play a ‘double game’ in Syria and Iraq, using its old doctrine of ‘plausible deniability’ to maintain the fiction of a ‘war on terrorism’ for as long as is possible.

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In times of ‘colour revolutions’ language has been turned on its head. Banks have become the guardians of the natural environment, sectarian fanatics are ‘activists’ and empires protect the world from great crimes, rather than committing them.

Colonisation of language is at work everywhere, amongst highly educated populations, but is peculiarly virulent in colonial cultures. ‘The West’, that self-styled epitome of advanced civilisation, energetically reinvents its own history, to perpetuate the colonial mindset.

Writers such as Frantz Fanon and Paolo Freire pointed out that colonised peoples experience psychological damage and need to ‘decolonise’ their minds, so as to become less deferential to imperial culture and to affirm more the values of their own societies. The other side to that is the impact of the colonial legacy on imperial cultures. Western peoples maintain their own culture as central, if not universal, and have difficulty listening to or learning from other cultures. Changing this requires some effort.

Powerful elites are well aware of this process and seek to co-opt critical forces within their own societies, colonising values and progressive language and trivialising the role of other peoples. For example, after the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the idea that NATO forces were protecting Afghan women was promoted and gained popularity. Despite broad opposition to the invasion and occupation, this ‘humanitarian’ goal appealed to the missionary side of western culture, to what we might call a ‘saviour complex’.

In 2012 Amnesty International put up posters saying ‘NATO: keep the progress going’, on women’s rights in Afghanistan (Wright and Rowley 2012) while the George W. Bush Institute collected money to promote Afghan women’s rights (Bush Center 2013). The unfortunate balance sheet of NATO’s long occupation is not so encouraging. The UNDP’s 2013 report shows that only 5.8% of Afghan women had some secondary schooling, the 7th lowest in the world; and the average Afghan woman has 6 babies, the equal 3rd highest rate in the world, and linked to low education (UNDP 2013). Occupying armies do not send children to school.

In many ways the ‘feminist war’ in Afghanistan drew on the British legacy in colonial India. As part of its great ‘civilising mission’ that empire claimed to be protecting Indian women from ‘sati’, the practise of widows throwing themselves (or being thrown) on their husband’s funeral pyre. In fact, colonial rule brought little change to this isolated practice (Banerjee c2014). To the contrary, the alleged empowerment of girls and women under British rule was a sorry joke. At independence adult literacy in India was only 12%, and for women much less. While India still lags in many respects, educational progress was much faster after independence in 1947.
Such facts have not stopped historians like Niall Ferguson and Lawrence James attempting to sanitise British colonial history, not least to defend the more recent interventions. It might appear difficult to justify colonialism, but the argument seems to have a better chance amongst peoples with a colonial past seeking vindication from within their own history and culture.

North American language is a bit different, as the United States of America claims never to have been a colonial power. That myth of the great beacon of freedom, the ‘light on the hill’, is important to its self-image (Gamble 2012). The fact that US declarations of freedom and equality were written by slave-owners and ethnic-cleansers (the US Declaration of Independence famously castigates the British for imposing limits on the seizure of Native American land) has not dimmed enthusiasm for those fine ideals. That skilful legacy certainly influences the wording and presentation of Washington’s recent interventions.

After the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq we saw a change in approach, with the big powers enlisting sectarian fanatics against the independent states of the region. Even the new Iraqi state, emerging from the rubble of 2003, was targeted by these Washington-directed fanatics. An ‘Arab Spring’ saw Libya trampled by an Islamist pseudo-revolution, backed by NATO bombing, then delivered to a bunch of squabbling al Qaeda groups and western collaborators. The little country that once had the highest living standards in Africa went backwards decades.

Next came brave Syria, which has resisted at terrible cost; and the propaganda war ran thick. Few in the west seemed able to penetrate it. Much of the western left shares illusions with the western right. What was at first said to be a nationalist and secular ‘revolution’ – an uprising against a ‘dictator’ who was killing his own people – was later said to be led by ‘moderate rebels’ or ‘moderate Islamists’. The extremist Islamists, who repeatedly publicise their own atrocities, are said to be a different species, against whom Washington and its allies finally decided to fight. Much of this might sound ridiculous to the average educated Arab, or Latin American, but it retains some appeal in the west.

One reason for the difference is that nation and state mean something different in the west. The western left has always seen the state as monolithic and nationalism as something akin to fascism; yet in the former colonies hope remains with the nation-state. Western populations have never had their own Ho Chi Minh, Gamal Abdul Nasser, Nelson Mandela, Salvador Allende, Hugo Chavez or Fidel Castro. One consequence of this is, as much as western thinkers might criticise their own states, they are reluctant to defend others. Many who criticise Washington or Israel will not defend Cuba or Syria.

All this makes proxy wars with claimed missionary aims far more marketable in the west. We could even say they have been a relatively successful tactic of imperial intervention, from the contra war on Nicaragua to the proxy armies in Syria. So long as the big power is not seen to be directly involved, western audiences find quite attractive the idea that they might be helping another people rise up and gain their ‘freedom’.

Even Noam Chomsky, author of many books on US imperialism and western propaganda, has adopted much of the western apologetics for intervention. In the case of Libya he said that intervention even without UN approval could be supported, because ‘preventing a likely massacre in Benghazi is no small matter, whatever one thinks of the motives’ (Chomsky 2011). After the Libyan disaster, in a 2013 interview with a Syrian opposition paper, he claimed the foreign-backed, Islamist insurrection in Syria was a repressed ‘protest movement’ that had been forced to militarise. America and Israel had no interest in bringing down the Syrian Government, he claimed. Admitting he was ‘excited’ by Syria’s
uprising, he rejected the idea of a ‘responsibility to protect’, saying he opposed direct US
intervention without a UN mandate. Nevertheless, he went on to join cause with those who
want to ‘force’ the Syrian Government to resign, adding that ‘nothing can justify Hezbollah’s
involvement’ in Syria (Chomsky 2013). This followed the Lebanese resistance group’s sup-
port for Syria, to help turn the tide against the NATO-backed ‘jihadists’.

How do western anti-imperialists come to similar conclusions to those of the White
House? First there is the anarchist or ultra-left idea of opposing all state power. This leads
to attacks on imperial power yet, at the same time, indifference or near-automatic opposi-
tion to independent states. Many western leftists even express enthusiasm at the idea of
toppling an independent state, despite knowing that the alternatives, as in Libya, will be
mass slaughter, bitter division and the destruction of important national institutions.

Second, reliance on western media sources has led many to believe that the civilian mas-
sacres in Syria were the work of the Syrian Government. Nothing could be further from the
truth. A careful reading of the evidence will show that most of the well-publicised civilian
massacres in Syria (Houla, Daraya, Aqrab, East Ghouta) were carried out by sectarian
Islamist groups, often to be falsely blamed on the government. Even when the independ-
ent evidence was conclusive, as in the case of the East Ghouta chemical weapons incident
(e.g. ISTEAMS 2013; Lloyd and Postol 2014; Hersh 2013), the western storyline did not
change. After the chemical weapons claims came the accusations that bombing of western-
backed terrorist groups was really the ‘barrel bombing’ of civilians. That was part of a long
tradition of the sectarian groups pretending their own losses were civilians. There seems
no end to these stories. President Bashar al Assad reasonably pointed out:

‘All wars are bad ... [but] we cannot stop fighting the terrorists who kill civilians for
fear of being accused by the West of using force’ (Assad 2015).

The third element which distorts western anti-imperial ideas seems to be the constrained
and self-referential nature of discussions. The parameters are policed by corporate gate-
keepers, but also reinforced by broader western illusions of their own civilising influence.

A few western journalists have reported in sufficient detail to help illustrate parts of the
Syrian conflict, but their perspectives are almost always conditioned by western ‘liberal’ and
‘humanitarian’ narratives. Indeed, the most aggressive advocacy of ‘humanitarian interven-
tion’ in recent years has come from liberal media outlets like the UK Guardian, the BBC and
corporate-NGOs such as Avaaz, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Those few
journalists who maintain an independent perspective, like Arab-American Sharmine
Narwani, publish mostly outside the better-known western media channels.

Imperial culture also conditions the humanitarian aid industry. Ideological pressure
comes not just from the development banks but also the NGO sector, which maintains a
powerful sense of mission, that ‘saviour complex’ over its relations with the rest of the
world. While ‘development cooperation’ may have once included ideas of compensation for
colonial rule, or assistance during a transition to independence, today it has become a $100
billion a year industry, with decision making firmly in the hands of western financial agen-
cies.

Apart from the practical dysfunction of many aid programs, this industry is deeply unde-
mocratic, with powerful colonial overtones. Aid programs are never really accountable to
local peoples. Yet many western aid workers believe they really can ‘save’ the poor peoples
of the world. That cultural vanity is deep. The agencies not only seek to determine econom-
ic policy, they often intervene in political and even constitutional processes. This is done in
the name of ‘good governance’, anti-corruption or ‘democracy strengthening’. Regardless of

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the problems of local bodies, it is rarely admitted that foreign aid agencies are the least democratic players of all.

For example, at the turn of this century, as Timor Leste gained its independence, aid bodies used their financial muscle to prevent the development of public institutions in agriculture and food security, and pushed that new country into creating competitive political parties, away from a national unity government. Seeking an upper hand amongst the ‘donor community’, Australia aggravated the subsequent political division and crisis of 2006 (Anderson 2006). With ongoing disputes over maritime boundaries and petroleum resources, Australian academics and advisers were quick to seize on that moment of weakness to urge that Timor Leste’s main party be ‘reformed’, that its national army be sidelined or abolished and that the country adopt English as a national language. Although all these pressures were resisted, it seemed in that moment that many Australian ‘friends’ of Timor Leste imagined they had ‘inherited’ the little country from the previous colonial rulers. Such is often the peculiar western sense of ‘solidarity’.

Imperial cultures have created a great variety of nice-sounding pretexts for intervention in the former colonies and newly independent countries. These pretexts include protecting the rights of women, ensuring good governance and helping promote ‘revolutions’. The level of double-speak is substantial. Yet interventions create problems for all sides. Independent peoples have to learn new forms of resistance. Those of good will in the imperial cultures might like to reflect on the ways we might decolonise the western mind.

Such a process is relatively simple at an ethical level, drawing on basic principles of human equality, mutual respect and friendship. At a political and intellectual level I suggest it could include reflection on (a) the historically different views of the nation-state, (b) the important, particular functions of post-colonial states, (c) the continued relevance and importance of the principle of self-determination, (d) the need to bypass a systematically deceitful embedded media and (e) the challenge of confronting fond illusions over a supposed western civilising influence. All these seem to form part of a neo-colonial mindset, at the root of the extraordinary western blindness to the damage done by uninvited intervention.

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The trees must close ranks to keep the giant with the seven-league boots from passing! — Cuban national hero Jose Marti (1881), on the need for regional unity.

‘No foreign officials might determine the future of Syria, the future of Syria’s political system or the individuals who should govern Syria. This is the Syrian peoples’ decision.’ Bashar al Assad, 2015

Washington’s plan for a New Middle East has hit a rock called Syria. Despite the ongoing bloodshed and serious economic pressures, Syria is advancing steadily towards a military and strategic victory that will transform the Middle East. There is clear evidence that Washington’s plans, whether for ‘regime change’, or for rendering the state dysfunctional and dismembering the country on sectarian lines, have failed. In its place we are seeing the rise of a stronger Resistance Axis, the core of which has been Iran, Syria, Palestine and Hezbollah, backed by Russia and drawing in Iraq.

Syria’s victory will be based on strong and coherent popular support for the national army, in face of vicious sectarian attacks, firm backing by Syria’s key allies, and fragmentation of the international forces lined up against them. Regional realignment has also been important. Fairly early in the conflict Egypt, under the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood government, was removed as an enemy. Even more important was Washington’s peace agreement with Iran, opposed by the Saudis and Israel, as they both knew it would strengthen the hand of Syria’s key regional ally. The Russian initiative in late September 2015, providing air power in coordination with the Syrian Army, was not only militarily decisive but also began to lock in Iraq as a full player in the Resistance Axis. The decision by Russia, Iran, Iraq and Syria to set up their anti-terrorism intelligence centre in Baghdad was no accident. The slow but steady shift of Iraq from a US client state across to the Resistance camp signals the depth of changes taking place.

Prior to the Russian initiative, and after almost five years of war, the economic situation in Syria had worsened; but there had been a consolidation of security. There were some intractable occupied areas, such as north-east Aleppo, Raqqa in the east, and Jobar and Douma in northeast Damascus, all areas occupied for years by thousands of armed sectarians. Yet elsewhere the armed groups had no real long term gains, as their offensives were beaten back. Millions relocated to the western cities.

The Governor of Latakia told me in July 2015 the province had grown from 1.3 million to more than 3 million. Sweida had taken 130,000 families from Daraa, also doubling in size. Something similar happened in Tartus, while the population of Damascus was said to have grown to 8.5 million. Displacement within the capital was also substantial. For example, after repeated incursions by al Nusra and ISIS, most of the population of the embattled
Palestinian settlement of Yarmouk moved to others parts of Damascus, such as Jaramana. Very few of these displaced families lived in tents; the great majority live in schools and other institutions, family homes, rental and other roofed accommodation.

The online ‘war of maps’ miss this. When commentators spoke of how much ‘territory’ one or other Islamist group controlled, they generally did not observe that the Government maintained control of the great majority of the populated areas and most of the displaced population sought refuge in those government controlled cities. By 2015 blackouts and shortages were worse, but schools, health centres, sports facilities were functioning. While life was hardly normal, everyday life did carry on. People were surviving, and resisting. This reality was hardly visible in the western media, which has persistently spread lies about the character of the conflict. In particular, they have tried to hide NATO’s backing for the extremist groups, while trumpeting the advances of those same groups and ignoring the Syrian Army’s counter-offensives.

**Fact check one:** there never were any ‘moderate rebels’. As this book has demonstrated, a genuine political reform movement was displaced by a Saudi-backed Islamist insurrection, over March-April 2011. The armed insurrection was sectarian Islamist from the beginning. Years later ordinary Syrians call all these groups ‘Daesh’ (ISIS), ‘terrorists’ or ‘mercenaries’, not bothering with the different brand names.

Only the agencies speaking with the armed groups, for example seeking the return of kidnapped people, pay much attention to the various labels. Genocidal statements by ‘moderate rebel’ leaders underline the limited difference between the genocidal ‘moderates’ and the genocidal extremists. FSA leader Lamia Nahas wrote:

> the more arrogant Syria’s minorities become I become more certain that there should be a holocaust to exterminate them from existence and I request [God’s] mercy upon Hitler who burned the Jews of his time and Sultan Abdul-Hamid who exterminated the Armenians’ (The Angry Arab 2015).

Similarly, Abdullah al-Ali told his social media friends that: ‘exterminating Nusayri [Alawi] villages is more important than liberating the Syrian capital’ (Fadel 2015). The genocidal fervour of these ‘moderates’ is no different than that of Nusra or ISIS. The character of the armed conflict has always been between an authoritarian but pluralist and socially inclusive state, and Saudi-style sectarian Islamists, acting as proxy armies for the big powers.

**Fact check two:** almost all the atrocities blamed on the Syrian Army have been committed by western-backed Islamists, as part of their strategy to attract more foreign military backing. Their claims are repeated by the western media, fed by partisan Islamist sources and amplified by embedded ‘watchdogs’, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The Syrian Army has indeed executed captured terrorists, and the secret police continue to detain and probably mistreat those suspected of collaborating with terrorists. But this is an army which enjoys very strong public support. Syrian people know their enemy and back their Army. The armed gangs, on the other hand, openly boast of their atrocities.

To the intelligent observer, persistent lies about the Army are discredited by the simple fact that, after several years, Syrian planes and artillery had not carpet bombed and flattened hold-out areas like Jobar, Douma, Raqqa and north-eastern Aleppo. We can be almost certain that the next time western agencies, relying on Islamist sources, say ‘civilians’ are being killed by ‘indiscriminate’ Syrian or Russian government bombing, it will be those same Islamist sources who are under attack.
There are two very different ‘end game’ stories in circulation. Washington and its minions have been obsessive and intransigent in their aim to isolate and exclude President Assad from a future Syrian Government. In any ways this is a testament to the independence of the man. However the western arrogance assumes they have subordinated Syria. This futile demand really illustrates how little respect Washington has for international law.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said perhaps the US should withdraw from the Geneva agreements of 2012, because those accords do not demand the removal of Bashar al Assad, rather they stress that ‘It is for the Syrian people to determine the future of the country’ (TASS 2015; UN 2012).

That is a simple but fundamental point that Washington does not want to understand. Russian President Putin is generally diplomatic to his western ‘partners’, however on one occasion he said: ‘Rise above the endless desire to dominate. You must stop acting out of imperialistic ambitions. Do not poison the consciousness of millions of people, like there can be no other way but imperialistic politics’ (Putin 2015). While talking the language of democracy and rights, the USA still pretends to determine the future of other countries.

Washington’s ‘Plan B’ for Syria has been a weakening and eventual dismemberment of the country. This is helpfully spelt out by a Brookings Institute paper of June 2015 (O’Hanlon 2015). This plan quite brazenly calls for Washington to break its ‘Syria problem’ into ‘a number of localised components ... envisioning ultimately a more confederal Syria made up of autonomous zones rather than being ruled by a strong central government’ (O’Hanlon 2015: 3). The false pretext is a supposed threat to the USA from ISIS. Yet that group, as this book has demonstrated, is a creation of the USA and its close allies. The Brookings report urges an initial two autonomous zones or ‘safe zones’ next to the borders of Jordan and Turkey, to allow ‘secure transportation lines for humanitarian as well as military supplies’.

Potential collaborators in this illegal plot are suggested as including: Jaish al Islam (the Army of Islam) around Damascus, ‘various Kurdish forces’, a ‘coalition of insurgents focussed on Aleppo’, Jaish al Fateh (the Army of Conquest, led by Jabhat al Nusra) around Idlib, and some others (O’Hanlon 2015: 9, 15). Virtually all these partners, except the Kurds, are the various al Qaeda groups and those that work with them. The Brookings proposal does recognise the strength of Damascus, by pretending to work around it. But the dismemberment of a sovereign country would only be possible if Syria were militarily crippled and without strong allies.

Yet Syria is not on its knees and it has strong allies. Further, regional realignments are running in its favour. While there is still much ‘sabre rattling’, most understand that Washington has lost its stomach for any major escalation, let alone a confrontation with Russia. Some regional states see what is coming and have begun to rebuild ties with Damascus. Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), both enemies of Syria just a little while back, have been normalising their diplomatic relations.

The UAE, perhaps the most ‘flexible’ of the Gulf monarchies, but also linked by US Vice President Joe Biden to support for ISIS, has its own worries. It recently arrested dozens of Islamists over a plot to turn the absolutist monarchy into an absolutist caliphate (Bloomberg 2015). Egypt, back in military hands after a short-lived Muslim Brotherhood Government, is now dealing with its own sectarian terrorism, from that same Brotherhood. The largest of Arab countries now defends the territorial integrity of Syria and at least verbally backs Syria’s campaigns against terrorism. Egyptian analyst Hassan Abou Taleb calls this message ‘a condemnation and rejection of Turkey’s unilateral moves’ against Syria (Reuters 2015).
The Erdogan Government, which tried to position Turkey at the head of a Muslim Brotherhood region, is often at odds with its anti-Syrian partners and faces its own domestic problems, not least from the large Kurdish minority. Washington has tried to use separatist Kurds against both Baghdad and Damascus, while Turkey sees them as key enemies and the extremist groups slaughter them as ‘apostate’ Muslims. For their part, the Kurdish communities have historically enjoyed greater autonomy under Iran and Syria.

Washington’s recent agreement with Iran was an important development, after 14 years of tension, as the Islamic Republic remains the most important regional ally of secular Syria and a firm opponent of Saudi-styled sectarians. Affirmation of Iran’s role in the region upsets the Saudis and Israel, but bodes well for Syria. There was serious diplomatic jockeying for position after the Iran deal and there can be little doubt that Iran’s hand has been strengthened in regional affairs. A decade after Washington’s ‘creative destruction’ plans, designed to reduce Iranian influence in Iraq, and several months before the Russian military initiative in Syria, Washington insiders were expressing despair that Iran’s regional influence is ‘at its highest point in almost four centuries’ (Kenner 2015).

The decision by Russia in late September 2015 to send in its tremendous air power to back the Syrian Army will most likely to prove decisive. Russia, legally invited to Syria, repeatedly requested US cooperation, thus calling Washington’s bluff. Washington was caught out, trapped by its own double speak. It had pretended not to own ISIS, failed to attack the terrorist group when Syrian towns were assailed and falsely pretended there was a fundamental difference between ISIS and the other ‘moderate rebels’. However Russia agreed with Syria that all the anti-government armed groups were sectarian terrorists.

The US refused to identify any of their ‘moderate rebel’ groups, so Russia took advice from the Syrian and attacked them all. In face of this, the US protested that their ‘moderates’ were being targeted, or that the Russians were ‘killing civilians’, but they were virtually unable to act. Neither Washington nor any of its allies had the stomach for a direct confrontation with the Syrian-Iranian-Russian-Iraqi-Hezbollah front. No Russian or official Iranian ground troops have been used. However Iran’s military commanders have mobilised militia from across the region to reinforce the Syrian Army, as they move to take back areas held for years by the western-backed gangs.

Some have compared the Russian initiative in Syria to the failed intervention of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan over 1979-1989. There are key differences.

First, the Syrian Arab Army and the Syrian people have resisted the largest scale terrorist proxy war in recent history, for four and a half years. The Afghan Government in the late 1970s called on Soviet tanks and troops very rapidly.

Second, Syria maintains strong regional alliances, with Iran, Hezbollah and, more recently Iraq. The Afghan Government of 1979 was surrounded by enemies.

Third, the Russian air power assistance, while very important, leaves the ground fighting to the large Syrian Army, backed up by domestic and neighbouring militia. Vladimir Putin was hardly unaware that a historical comparison might be made. It seems that the strength of Syrian resistance was decisive. If the Syrian people had not resisted for years and if President Assad had fled the country, as did President Yanukovych of Ukraine, Syria would not have received such direct Russian assistance.

Syria is winning because the Syrian people have backed their army against sectarian provocations, mostly fighting their own battles against NATO and Gulf Monarchy sponsored multi-national terrorism. Syrians, including most devout Sunni Muslims, reject that head-
chopping, vicious and sectarian perversion of Islam promoted by the Gulf monarchies. This is no sectarian or Shia-Sunni war, but a classical imperial war, using proxy armies. In post-conflict Syria there will be no role for Washington, for much the same reason as rapists and murderers are not invited back into the families which suffered their crimes, so they can help put the pieces back together.

The regional implications are profound. Syria’s victory will spell an end to Washington’s bloody spree of ‘regime change’ across the region, from Afghanistan to Iraq to Libya to Syria. Out of the death and misery from this dirty war we are seeing the emergence of a stronger ‘Axis of Resistance’. Syria has survived, Iran is stronger, Iraq is joining the Resistance Axis and Russia has moved decisively in counter-weight fashion to back them up. That combination will seal the humiliating defeat of plans for a US-Israel-Saudi-Turkey dominated ‘New Middle East’. Regional unity and independence comes at a terrible cost, but it is coming.

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Most of the western media, plus the Gulf Monarchy media (Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya), is deeply biased and in many cases engaged in fabrications to support a propaganda war against Syria. That raises the question: where might one go to find credible or independent information?

There is no simple answer, and the reader will notice I have used a wide range of sources. However here is a short list of relevant online sources, relatively independent of big power agendas, with services in English, as well as other languages. They should help an honest observer stay better informed.

**A. National Media, anti-imperial**
- Syrian TV ([http://www.syriaonline.sy/](http://www.syriaonline.sy/))

**B. Non-Government, independent**
- Middle East Channel – Syria ([http://www.me-channel.com/](http://www.me-channel.com/))
- Al Mayadeen – Lebanon (only in Arabic) ([http://www.almayadeen.net/](http://www.almayadeen.net/))
- As Safir – Lebanon ([http://assafir.com/Channel/50/English](http://assafir.com/Channel/50/English))
- Uprooted Palestinians – blog ([https://uprootedpalestinians.wordpress.com/](https://uprootedpalestinians.wordpress.com/))
- Electronic Intifada – USA ([https://electronicintifada.net/](https://electronicintifada.net/))
- Syrian Free Press – USA ([https://syrianfreepress.wordpress.com/](https://syrianfreepress.wordpress.com/))
- Vineyard of the Saker – USA ([http://thesaker.is/](http://thesaker.is/))
- South Front – Canada, UK, USA ([http://southfront.org/](http://southfront.org/))
- Global Research – Canada ([http://www.globalresearch.ca/](http://www.globalresearch.ca/))
Al Masdar – USA (http://www.almasdarnews.com/)
New Eastern Outlook – Russia (http://journal-neo.org/)
Counter Punch – USA (http://www.counterpunch.org/)
The Greanville Post – USA (http://www.greanvillepost.com/)
SOTT – USA and France (http://www.sott.net/)
Hands off Syria – Australia (http://www.handsoffsyriasydney.com/)

C. Critical media analysis

Media lens – UK – (http://www.medialens.org/)
Off Guardian – UK – (http://off-guardian.org/)
FAIR – USA (http://fair.org/)

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The Globalization of War
America’s “Long War” against Humanity
MICHEL CHOSSUDOVSKY
ISBN 978-0-9737147-6-0

America’s hegemonic project in the post 9/11 era is the “Globalization of War” whereby the U.S.-NATO military machine — coupled with covert intelligence operations, economic sanctions and the thrust of “regime change”— is deployed in all major regions of the world. The threat of pre-emptive nuclear war is also used to black-mail countries into submission.

This “Long War against Humanity” is carried out at the height of the most serious economic crisis in modern history.

It is intimately related to a process of global financial restructuring, which has resulted in the collapse of national economies and the impoverishment of large sectors of the World population.

The ultimate objective is World conquest under the cloak of “human rights” and “Western democracy”.

Towards a World War III Scenario
The Dangers of Nuclear War
MICHEL CHOSSUDOVSKY
ISBN 978-0-9737147-5-3

The US has embarked on a military adventure, “a long war”, which threatens the future of humanity. US-NATO weapons of mass destruction are portrayed as instruments of peace. Mini-nukes are said to be “harmless to the surrounding civilian population”. Pre-emptive nuclear war is portrayed as a “humanitarian undertaking”.

While one can conceptualize the loss of life and destruction resulting from present-day wars including Iraq and Afghanistan, it is impossible to fully comprehend the devastation which might result from a Third World War, using “new technologies” and advanced weapons, until it occurs and becomes a reality. The international community has endorsed nuclear war in the name of world peace. “Making the world safer” is the justification for launching a military operation which could potentially result in a nuclear holocaust.

Nuclear war has become a multibillion dollar undertaking, which fills the pockets of US defense contractors. What is at stake is the outright “privatization of nuclear war”.

The Pentagon’s global military design is one of world conquest. The military deployment of US-NATO forces is occurring in several regions of the world simultaneously.

The object of this book is to forcefully reverse the tide of war, challenge the war criminals in high office and the powerful corporate lobby groups which support them.
The Global Economic Crisis: The Great Depression of the XXI Century

MICHEL CHOSSUDOVSKY AND ANDREW GAVIN MARSHALL, EDITORS


In all major regions of the world, the economic recession is deep-seated, resulting in mass unemployment, the collapse of state social programs and the impoverishment of millions of people. The meltdown of financial markets was the result of institutionalized fraud and financial manipulation. The economic crisis is accompanied by a worldwide process of militarization, a “war without borders” led by the U.S. and its NATO allies.

This book takes the reader through the corridors of the Federal Reserve, into the plush corporate boardrooms on Wall Street where far-reaching financial transactions are routinely undertaken.

Each of the authors in this timely collection digs beneath the gilded surface to reveal a complex web of deceit and media distortion which serves to conceal the workings of the global economic system and its devastating impacts on people’s lives.

The Globalization of Poverty and the New World Order

MICHEL CHOSSUDOVSKY

ISBN 09737147-0-0 (2003), 403 pages

In this new and expanded edition of Chossudovsky’s international best-seller, the author outlines the contours of a New World Order which feeds on human poverty and the destruction of the environment, generates social apartheid, encourages racism and ethnic strife and undermines the rights of women. The result as his detailed examples from all parts of the world show so convincingly, is a globalization of poverty.

This book is a skilful combination of lucid explanation and cogently argued critique of the fundamental directions in which our world is moving financially and economically.

In this new enlarged edition –which includes ten new chapters and a new introduction- the author reviews the causes and consequences of famine in Sub-Saharan Africa, the dramatic meltdown of financial markets, the demise of State social programs and the devastation resulting from corporate downsizing and trade liberalization.

Award winning author and economics professor Michel Chossudovsky is Director of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG).

Seeds of Destruction: The Hidden Agenda of Genetic Manipulation
F. WILLIAM ENGDAHL

This skillfully researched book focuses on how a small socio-political American elite seeks to establish control over the very basis of human survival: the provision of our daily bread. "Control the food and you control the people."

This is no ordinary book about the perils of GMO. Engdahl takes the reader inside the corridors of power, into the backrooms of the science labs, behind closed doors in the corporate boardrooms.

The author cogently reveals a diabolical World of profit-driven political intrigue, government corruption and coercion, where genetic manipulation and the patenting of life forms are used to gain worldwide control over food production. If the book often reads as a crime story, that should come as no surprise. For that is what it is.

Engdahl's carefully argued critique goes far beyond the familiar controversies surrounding the practice of genetic modification as a scientific technique. The book is an eye-opener, a must-read for all those committed to the causes of social justice and world peace.


MICHEL CHOSSUDOVSKY
ISBN 0-9737147-1-9 (2005), 387 pages

In this 2005 best-selling title, the author blows away the smoke-screen put up by the mainstream media, that 9/11 was an attack on America by "Islamic terrorists". Through meticulous research, the author uncovers a military-intelligence ploy behind the September 11 attacks, and the cover-up and complicity of key members of the Bush Administration.

This expanded edition, which includes twelve new chapters, focuses on the use of 9/11 as a pretext for the invasion and illegal occupation of Iraq, the militarization of justice and law enforcement and the repeal of democracy.

According to Chossudovsky, the "war on terrorism" is a complete fabrication based on the illusion that one man, Osama bin Laden, outwitted the $40 billion-a-year American intelligence apparatus. The "war on terrorism" is a war of conquest. Globalization is the final march to the "New World Order", dominated by Wall Street and the U.S. military-industrial complex.

September 11, 2001 provides a justification for waging a war without borders. Washington's agenda consists in extending the frontiers of the American Empire to facilitate complete U.S. corporate control, while installing within America the institutions of the Homeland Security State. Chossudovsky peels back layers of rhetoric to reveal a complex web of deceit aimed at luring the American people and the rest of the world into accepting a military solution which threatens the future of humanity.