

'SAVIOUR' OR 'SAVAGE'?

Unravelling the Western narrative on Bashar al-Assad and the war in Syria

By Donnelly McClelland



"The first casualty, when war comes, is truth," said Hiram Johnson (a progressive US Republican senator in California) during World War I.

For seven years, the Western narrative has maintained that Syrian president Bashar al-Assad is a monster: a vile, barbaric murderer of his own people. In a recent tweet, US president Donald Trump said to the Russians: "You shouldn't be partners with a Gas Killing Animal who kills his people and enjoys it!" (referencing a recent suspected chemical weapon attack on the rebel-held neighbourhood of Douma, east of the Syrian capital,

Damascus). If you ask minority groups (Shiites, Alawites, Christians, Druze, etc.) and moderate, educated, business-minded Sunni Muslims what they think of Mr Assad and the Syrian government forces, the response is quite opposite to the Western narrative.

"Repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth" is a law of propaganda often attributed to Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi politician. Psychologists refer to this as the "illusion of truth" effect. Repetition makes a fact seem more true, regardless of whether or not it is. Understanding this effect can help people to avoid falling for propaganda, says psychologist Tom Stafford. The reason why this issue is of utmost importance is that in the age we live in, where technology has enabled information to be disseminated at incredible speeds, we (the average public) become complicit in spreading the lies. Thankfully, repetition is not the only thing that influences what we believe – we can bring to bear extensive powers of reasoning, but we need to be mindful that our minds are prey to the illusion of truth effect because our instinct is to use short-cuts in judging how plausible something is.

Religious liberty analyst, Elizabeth Kendal, raises a deep concern: "Because the narrative of Middle Eastern Christians conflicts with the narrative of Western governments, the Christians – along with their inconvenient and politically incorrect narrative of Islamic persecution and genocidal jihad – are airbrushed out of the picture and silenced, pushed ever deeper into the fog of war, which for most observers is pea-soup thick."

It has been INcontext's experience too that the consistent message from believers in Syria (and from refugees in Lebanon) contradicts the prevailing Western narrative. We agree with Kendal when she says: "Understanding has long-term value and is a very powerful thing, for it can enable discernment – which is essential if we are to resist manipulation and exploitation – and propel people into action."

What follows is an attempt to unpack a very complex issue, to provide deeper understanding, eliminate ignorance, and unravel the confusion.

1. AN OVERVIEW OF THE EVENTS OF APRIL 2018 THUS FAR

On **4 April**, the leaders of Iran, Russia and Turkey met in Ankara for high-level talks on ending the Syrian war, cementing their influence on the outcome of the conflict and isolating the United States from the region's most crucial diplomacy. They emphasised their opposition to "separatist agendas" in Syria. Simultaneously, a senior US administration official said on Wednesday 4 April that President Trump had instructed military officials to prepare to withdraw US troops from Syria.

In the first months of 2018, the Syrian army began a major offensive on the remaining rebel-held enclave of Eastern Ghouta, on the outskirts of Damascus. By the end of March (early April), only the town of Douma remained under rebel control, and their defeat was imminent.

On **7 April** – as rebels had their backs to the wall, major role-players (minus any Western governments) were discussing Syria's future, and the rebels' major ally (the US) was considering pulling their troops out of Syria – there was an alleged chemical attack on Douma. Fingers were quickly pointed in the direction of Syrian government forces, but they (and their ally, Russia) vehemently denied it. Images and video were rapidly disseminated, and outrage was palpable across news outlets far and wide.

In the early hours of **9 April**, an airstrike was carried out on Tiyas Military Airbase, reportedly killing several people. The US denied launching the airstrike, and an Israeli spokeswoman declined to comment. But Russia said Israel was responsible, and that two Israeli F-15I jets attacked the airfield from Lebanese airspace, firing eight missiles, of which five were intercepted.

On **10 April**, there were competing UN Security Council solutions on how to handle the response to the alleged chemical attack. The US, France and the UK vetoed a Russian-proposed UN resolution. Russia also vetoed the US' proposed resolution to create "a new investigative mechanism to look into chemical weapons attacks in Syria and determine who is responsible." Syria and Russia invited the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to investigate if chemical weapons were used. (OPCW were in the process of heading to Syria to investigate the alleged attack, when the US, France and Britain unleashed missiles on suspected chemical weapon sites in Homs and Damascus.)

Hardly any Western news media outlets asked why Mr Assad would resort to a chemical attack when he had already all but secured 'victory' over the rebels in Eastern Ghouta using conventional methods. As Mr Trump vented his outrage via Twitter, threatening missile strikes, and Russia warned of a response if they did, it was reported that Syrian government forces and their Russian ally were moving their military assets out of harm's way. Again, no one seemed to ask what Mr Assad gained by a chemical attack, when he had to lose all momentum against rebel forces in Douma to move his assets out of harm's way.

On **14 April**, after just a few days of deliberation, a combined US, French and British aerial assault on targets in Homs and Damascus was launched. No questions were asked about how these sites were selected in a matter of days, when information had not yet been presented to the world about the "irrefutable evidence" that these nations claimed to possess. Although a number of news sites mentioned the disastrous invasion of Iraq in 2003 – in search of 'weapons of mass destruction' that were never found – most did not seem to see those catastrophic events as a need for caution when leaping to further conclusions. It seems all too easy for powerful nations to decide another nation's fate and condemn their citizens to perpetual war and instability: Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen and Syria are all cases in point.



2. ASYMMETRIC WARFARE AND THE ROLE OF PROPAGANDA

So, if the Syrian government forces and Russia do not seem to profit directly from a chemical attack, who could possibly benefit from such ruthless, heinous acts? The rebels (and their foreign backers) who are consistently losing ground, and potentially the backing of the US, their strongest ally?

To better understand this possibility, it is imperative that readers understand how modern asymmetric warfare is enacted, especially as we – the public – are integral to it.



Elizabeth Kendal explains it in her book, *After Saturday Comes Sunday*: “An asymmetric conflict is one fought between unequal forces: one weak, one strong. On the one hand, it might be a case of persecuted, repressed, or occupied peoples (weak) taking on their oppressive overlords (strong) in a struggle for liberty. On the other hand, it might be a case of separatists, usurpers or even terrorists (weak) taking on the state (strong) in a grab for power.”

Some examples of recent asymmetric conflicts include the Vietcong (weak) versus US-allied forces (strong); the Afghan mujahideen (weak) versus the Soviet occupation (strong); Bosnian Islamic secessionists (weak) versus the state of Yugoslavia (strong); Muslim ethnic-Albanian separatists in Serbia’s Kosovo province (weak) versus the state of Serbia (strong); Muslim militias (weak) versus the state of Ivory Coast (strong); and the Afghan Taliban (weak) versus NATO (strong).

In all the examples listed above, the weak prevailed against the strong. In this technological age, it appears to be increasingly difficult for a strong force to prevail against a weaker foe that has perfected the art of asymmetric warfare. Typical tactics of weaker forces include creative, unconventional and deceptive methods. One of the most powerful “tools” is psychological operations (psyops) designed to create the illusion of great strength – anything to strike terror into the hearts of the enemy to lessen their resolve, sow confusion, or even convince them to retreat.

Kendal proposes, however, that there is an alternative to winning or losing (and probably dying): “political mileage”. She goes on to explain: “Militarily weak groups like Hamas and Hezbollah can achieve their goals precisely by picking a fight they know they cannot win and then making political mileage out of being weak and getting clobbered!”

Historian Richard Landes elaborates: “All asymmetrical wars take place primarily in the cognitive arena, with the major theatre of war the enemy’s public sphere. The goal is to convince your far more powerful enemy not to fight. The mainstream news media – their journalists, editors, producers – constitute a central front of this cognitive war: the ‘weak’ but aggressive side cannot have success without the witting and unwitting cooperation of the enemy’s journalists.”

Kendal goes on: “In a democracy, it is imperative that an acceptable narrative be established that will legitimise and justify the provision of military aid. The weak force must be seen as worthy victims and the stronger force must be so thoroughly demonised that anyone not voicing support for a ‘humanitarian intervention’ is sure to be widely vilified.”

According to Kendal, “humanitarian interventions” have little to no humanitarian value. They are “military interventions made in pursuit of economic and geostrategic gains; they are merely presented as ‘humanitarian’ for domestic consumption.” We should not be deceived. Kendal explains further: “Western politicians wanting to legitimise an intervention will send out signals – wittingly or unwittingly – on what ‘red line’ would need to be crossed before an intervention could be justified. For example ... in Syria, the use of chemical weapons (US President Barack Obama to the Syrian opposition). Once the red line is crossed – or at least, is believed to have been crossed (they are not the same) – then the intervention simply must proceed to avoid a national loss of face.”

3. UNDERSTANDING PSYOPS

A key element of psyops is **language**. Kendal highlights an *Al Maydeen TV* interview in 2012 with conflict analyst Aisling Byrne, who commented on the West’s repeated use of the term “regime” to refer to the Syrian leadership, and “government” to describe the leadership of Saudi Arabia or Qatar. Byrne explained: “It is illegal under the UN Charter to arm forces for toppling a sovereign government... [Consequently] the narrative is couched in humanitarian terms so that it creates this public support in the West for an illegal regime change.”

Kendal proposes that propaganda is central to psyops and highlights two commonly used tactics for generating propaganda and establishing narratives: the use of human shields and the false



flag operation. She asserts: “Once generated, the propaganda is disseminated, more often than not through mainstream media.”

- **Human shields** – these are unarmed civilians, behind which a weak force provokes the enemy. The strong force is then faced with the dilemma of withholding fire or returning fire (with the guarantee of civilian casualties). This is one of the key reasons that bases of operation are set up in schools, hospitals, etc. If the strong force returns fire, a “massacre” will be reported.

The Syrian ‘humanitarian’ group, the White Helmets, has been accused of being complicit with the broadcasting of such ‘massacres’ and their legitimacy has been widely questioned and criticised, but because this does not complement the ‘accepted narrative’, they are said to be ‘victimised’ by anyone questioning their motives.

- **False flags** – Kendal describes this as “an operation ... in which the weaker force perpetrates an appalling attack that is then attributed to the enemy.” Pulitzer-prize winning investigative journalist Seymour Hersh (in *London Review of Books*) made just such a claim of the sarin attack in Eastern Ghouta in 2013 in his article “*Whose Sarin?*”. He wrote: “... In recent interviews with intelligence and military officers and consultants past and present, I found intense concern, and on occasion anger, over what was repeatedly seen as the deliberate manipulation of intelligence. One high-level intelligence officer, in an email to a colleague, called the administration’s assurances of Mr Assad’s responsibility a ‘ruse’. The attack ‘was not the result of the current regime’, he wrote. A former senior intelligence official told me that the Obama administration had altered the available information – in terms of its timing and sequence – to enable the president and his advisers to make intelligence retrieved days after the attack look as if it had been picked up and analysed in real time, as the attack was happening.”

Hersh also highlighted the following information that was not made public at the time: “In the months before the attack, the American intelligence agencies produced a series of highly classified reports, culminating in a formal Operations Order – a planning document that precedes a ground invasion – citing evidence that the al-Nusra Front, a jihadi group affiliated with al-Qaeda, had mastered the mechanics of creating sarin and was capable of manufacturing it in quantity.” This is the same region where the recent “chemical attack” occurred.

In a report, “*Attack on Syria: US has Returned to ‘Business as Usual’*” by *Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy* (the magazine of the Washington-based International Strategic Studies Association) in response to President Trump’s firing of missiles at a base in Syria in 2017, we find the following: “The incident may well be as strategically pivotal – domestically as well as internationally – as the decision in January 2002 by US President George W. Bush to attack Iraq.”

To understand why the Western narrative is so intent on painting Mr Assad as a “monster who kills his own people”, one needs to understand the motives of the key role-players that are driving the Syrian war.

4. GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS AND ALLIANCES

The major alliances in Syria are divided along the Sunni-Shia ‘faultline’ (and their allies). It is a battle, according to Kendal, over the regional balance of power, “a battle that pits the US-backed Turkey-Arab-Sunni axis against the Iran-led, Shi’ite-dominated Axis of Resistance of which Arab (mostly Sunni) Syria is integral.” She continues: “It is a battle over territory that is geopolitically strategic and critical to vital interests. As for economic interests, the issue is who will dominate the supply of energy to Europe.”

The battle has to do, writes Kendal, with “US and Sunni efforts to realign Syria, taking it out of the Shia Crescent so as to counter the ascent of Iran.” Aisling Byrne, in an article for *Asia Times*, describes the battle for Syria as the first stage of a “war on Iran”. She quotes Saudi Arabia’s late King Abdullah, who observed: “Other than the collapse of the Islamic Republic itself, nothing would weaken Iran more than losing Syria.” She also notes a comment by the US administration back in 2012 that regime change in Syria would strike a massive blow to Iranian power in the region. She concludes: “What we are seeing in Syria is a deliberate and calculated campaign to bring down the Assad government so as to replace it with a regime ‘more compatible’ with US [Western] interests in the region.”



Why was so little said about Syria prior to 2011? According to the Western narrative, the 2011 “Arab Spring” was a historic movement in which Arab masses rose up in popular revolutions in pursuit of liberal, Western-style democracy – a struggle between “totalitarian tyrants and the democratic masses”. But many refugees say that Syria was beautiful and full of opportunities before 2011. Fashion weeks, crowded markets, tourists,

resorts, ancient architecture and even casinos were found in pre-war Syria, which was peaceful and hospitable and, in a local’s words, “an absolutely wonderful place”.

On 10 January 2012, Mr Assad delivered a speech in the Damascus University Auditorium: “Today I am addressing you ten months after the outbreak of the unfortunate events which befell the country imposing new circumstances on the Syrian arena... At the beginning of the crisis, it was not easy to explain what happened. Emotional reactions and the absence of rationality were surpassing the facts. But now, the fog has lifted, and it is no longer possible for the regional and international parties which wanted to destabilise Syria to forge the facts and the events. Our utmost priority now, which is unparalleled by any other priority, is the restoration of the security we have enjoyed for decades, and which has characterised our country, not only in the region but throughout the world.”

He continued: “[Our enemies] are trying to depict Syria as an isolated country, trying to stress this over and over again. But our points of strength lie in our strategic position. If they want to besiege Syria, they will end up besieging the whole region.”

5. FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Syria’s Christian community is one of the oldest in the world, going back two millennia and pre-existing Islam by 600 years. The apostle Paul is said to have been converted on the road to Damascus, and some Christians from the town of Maaloula can still speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus. Christianity grew throughout Mesopotamia (called “the Fertile Crescent”), but came under tremendous pressure during the Islamic campaign to conquer Mesopotamia between 635 and 642 AD. Both Syria and Iraq became dominated by Arabs and Islam seemingly in a joint operation between Muslim armies and Arabs who had already settled in the region and who subsequently turned on their neighbours.

By the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the Assyrian population (Christians) had declined to between 800,000 and 1.2 million. The US-led regime-change operation liberated Iraq’s long-repressed Shi’ite minority while also triggering a Sunni resistance, which provided fertile ground for al-Qaeda. The subsequent persecution of Christians led to a massive exodus across the border into the safe haven of Mr Assad’s Syria.

Christians are believed to have constituted about 30% of the Syrian population as recently as the 1920s. In 2015, it was estimated that they made up about 10% of Syria’s 22 million people. Sunni Muslims made up some 70% of the population, and about 12% are Alawites – members of a heterodox Shia sect to which Mr Assad belongs. There are also smaller numbers of Druze and other sects.

The vast majority of Syrian Christians belong to Eastern denominations. Despite their minority status, Christians have long been among Syria’s elite, and have been represented in many of the political groups that have vied for control of the country, including the secular Arab nationalist and socialist movements that eventually came to the fore. The founder of the Baath Party, which has ruled Syria since 1963, was a Christian, and Christians rose to senior positions in the party, government and security forces (although they are generally not seen to have any real power compared with their Alawite and Sunni colleagues). Christians are believed to have valued the rights and protection accorded to minorities by Hafez al-Assad, who was president between 1971 and 2000, and by his son, Bashar. A large proportion of the country’s Sunni Muslims tolerated or supported the Assads, whom they saw as guarantors of stability.

When protests began in 2011, many Christians were cautious and tried to avoid taking sides. However, as the government crackdown intensified and opposition supporters took up arms, they were gradually drawn into the conflict. Hundreds of thousands of Christians were displaced by fighting or left the country. The vast majority of those

who have remained support Mr Assad, especially as they have experienced the brutality of Islamic extremists. Many fear that if Mr Assad is overthrown, Christians will be targeted and communities destroyed as many were in Iraq after the US-led invasion in 2003.

Elizabeth Kendal highlights the concerns of Syrian Christians: “Of all the groups operating in the Mesopotamia theatre, only the US lacks clear goals. Consequently, US policy has been inconsistent and contradictory, confounding its allies, and causing dismay and despair amongst the region’s existentially imperilled Christians who, in their heart of hearts had truly believed the West, particularly the US, might actually help them.”

Kendal goes on to describe the situation: “In the eye of the storm, in the buffer zone between the region’s three imperialistic powers [ascendant Iran versus the Arabs (led by Saudi Arabia) versus neo-Ottoman Turkey], on the sectarian fault line between the region’s two principle Islamic sects, at the flashpoint where the two political axes intersect, is the ancient Christian heartland where the disciples of Jesus were first called Christians – where the first Christian denomination (the Assyrian Church of the East) was established, from where the gospel spread west into Europe and east into Persia and China, and to where persecuted ‘early church’ Christians once fled for refuge.”

Despite the tremendous odds they face, many Christians have remained in Syria – some were unable to leave, while others chose to remain, and to them the Lord has gifted the masses, seeking hope in the midst of terribly dark times.

In 2017, INcontext met with a group of more than a dozen Syrian pastors who travelled to neighbouring Lebanon for a time of sharing, reflecting and recharging before heading back to their congregations. What they shared boggled the mind: while Aleppo is seen from the outside as “hell on earth”, they spoke of “God’s paradise”, since it was where people were “running into the Kingdom”. There is a blind pastor, leading his flock, guided by the Holy Spirit. Another pastor asked for assistance with renting a larger building to house the many believers, as he could not keep up with the number of services he needed to conduct each Sunday to reach them all.



Let us hear the heart’s cry of brothers and sisters in Syria, and let us not forsake them.

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